LEADING CHANGE THROUGH NETWORKS

Learning Brief

INSIGHTS FOR NETWORK FACILITATORS

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The power of many. Across international development sectors, networks are recognized as powerful forces for change. While different types of networks exist, this learning brief focuses on developing and elevating the performance of change networks. In this context, a change network is defined as a set of connected actors that seeks to achieve specific results through the partnership and contributions of its members.

Elevating the performance of a change network can involve looking internally: how the network is structured, how it functions, who are its members, and how do they value the network. Network facilitators can also look externally: how do members benefit through exchange, how are their ideas influencing others, and how do they make progress toward shared goals.

KEY TERMS

Change Network: A set of connected actors seeking to achieve results through partnership

Network Facilitator: An actor seeking to develop, maintain and/or enhance network performance

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This learning brief outlines a framework of network components that can be used by network facilitators and members to reflect upon and elevate their performance. This is not a prescriptive guide. Network facilitators are advised to tackle the components that are most logical and useful for their stage of development. It is preferable to focus on components that most critical network performance, rather than attempting to address all components at the same time.

Networks and their contexts are fluid and continually changing. As a result, maintaining and enhancing change networks over time should be seen as a continual process of growth and adaptation.

LINC

Facilitating Change Networks

Legend
- Internal
- External
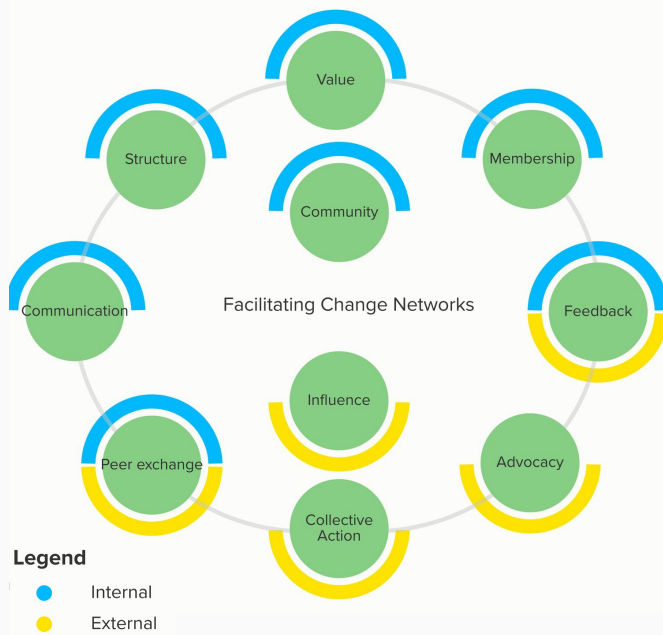
INTRODUCTION

This network framework was developed through experience, literature review, and consultations. The graphic above illustrates a set of network components relevant to facilitating change networks: value, structure, membership, communication, feedback, peer exchange, advocacy, collective action, community, and influence. Components that are primarily internally facing within the network are highlighted in blue, and components externally facing beyond the network are highlighted in yellow.

These components are neither comprehensive nor mutually exclusive; on the contrary, activities in each area are closely related to the others with relation to the overall functioning of a change network. In the following sections, each component of the network framework is described along with key considerations and reflection points for network facilitators.

INTERNAL

VALUE

A foundational activity for change networks is to define the collective value proposition of the network: why participants are motivated and interested to be in the network. While the network's value is related to its stated purpose, its composition, and its structure, none of these characteristics define how and why members value the network. Potential value propositions may include aspects such as connections, knowledge, competencies, collaboration, and/or resources. In order to understand the network's value, network facilitators can undertake individual and group activities to understand what members expect from the network, what would keep them engaged in the network, and what they are willing to provide to the network.

STRUCTURE

How the network is structured and governed should be related to its overall objectives. There is no one correct structure for a network, and any efforts to measure network connectivity must be oriented toward the network's purpose. Well-functioning networks have rules of engagement and norms that are accepted by its members, as well as a structure that supports that network's objective and operations. Network facilitators can examine and foster discussion around network structure topics including leadership structures, the presence of sub-groups, and decision-making processes.

MEMBERSHIP

Membership determines what it means to be part of the network, and what role different individuals play. Networks may have different levels of membership, as well as processes for gaining or losing membership.

Roles may emerge organically or through more structured processes. In additional to formal leadership roles, other network roles may include conversation starters, topic experts, connectors, recruiters, and knowledge managers. Membership activities consider who is part of the network and who might be added, as well as what are members' roles and how well they function.

COMMUNICATIONS

How communications flow through the network is important to its overall functioning and effectiveness. Communications includes both platforms and activities for communicating within the network, within subgroups, as well as among individual members. Communications platforms must be right-sized to the group's needs and easy to use. As possible and appropriate, communications processes and platforms may also be integrated into existing structures.

COMMUNITY

Creating a sense of identity and belonging can strengthen members' commitment and their ability to work together. Encouraging informal social exchanges is a useful strategy for building community. For members separated by distance, network facilitators can seek to humanize the experience of engaging with the network through tools such as member profiles, interactive features on communications platforms, and linkages to in-person events.

"Creating a sense of identity and belonging can strengthen members' commitment and their ability to work together."

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL

FEEDBACK

As a network evolves, feedback helps the network to improve and adapt over time. Positive and negative feedback from members on other network components (such as value, structure, and communications) support the long-term relevance and sustainability of the network. Feedback can emerge through structured approaches, as well as in response to emergent needs and challenges. Network facilitators can consider what are the norms, processes, and tools for feedback, as well as how decisions for making adaptations are made. Feedback mechanisms can also be developed with stakeholder outside the network to track the network's perception and performance.

PEER EXCHANGE

When members seek and offer help as a result of their participation in the network, the value and the strength of the network increases. Peer support can include activities such as sharing information and knowledge resources, solving problems, and offering specialized assistance. Peer exchange can occur within the network, or members can use the network to access peer exchange outside the network. Network facilitators can be matchmakers, helping to build these connections directly, as well as supporting areas of common need such as shared libraries and events.

EXTERNAL

COLLECTIVE ACTION

Focusing on collective action helps facilitators understand and define how their network plans and aligns around shared goals. Working toward shared goals is often closely related to why members value participation in change networks. It is worth recognizing that collective action activities may not involve all members or groups in the network, and they may also engage individuals and groups outside of the network as part of a wider coalition.

Many networks begin by a small collective action activity ("quick wins") before making larger decisions such as their overall structure and functioning. Achieving success—or learning from failure—can serve to strengthen the long-term bonds and sustainability of the network.

ADVOCACY

Many change networks use advocacy to advance their goals, including developing key messages, generating evidence, and launching media strategies. Network facilitators should consider how the network presents and brands itself to external audiences. Advocacy can also consider extending the reach of network products and learning through external communications efforts.

INFLUENCE

Finally, change networks often seek to foster shifts in policies, actions, and mindsets. Their level and type of influence is central to these efforts. Strategic positioning of the network as a leader can serve to build credibility as well as enhance its reach. Influence strategies may also target and build connections with highly influential actors outside of the network.

KEY REFERENCES

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CONTACT THE AUTHOR

This learning brief was developed based on evolving research and consultations with experts, as well as learning from implementation in the field. The author welcomes feedback and learning from other development practitioners on the strategies they are using to lead change through networks.

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