Brief

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Leadership is influence: making informal networks work as well as formal organisation structures to build capability, buy-in and knowledge on the issues that matter

The spread and ease of digital communication is allowing large organisations to make more of informal networks of people that cross silos and improve collaboration. They can work better and faster than traditional organisation structures – and be built just as deliberately.

We looked at the best known material on informal networks (sometimes called communities of interest or practice) to summarise core ideas, common themes and what is seen as best practice in encouraging them to succeed. The most influential of these is *Communities of Practice* by Etienne Wenger at the Institute for Research on Learning, California (see full list at the end).

What defines an informal network? It is worth clarifying what they are, and are not.

- *Purpose*: for leaders this is to extend influence over people that a leader does not have line authority over, across organisational borders, to build buy-in knowledge and capability. This would be done in support of a key priority, challenge or issue for the business. The informal network is 'voluntary', informal: ideal for sounding out and improving plans - and for early warning of disconnects between global plans and reality on the ground. The more aligned and consistent an organisation wants to be - the more valuable networks can be.

  This is especially true where a business wants to work in more global ways, or improve collaboration across widely dispersed teams or units.

  An informal network can sometimes be just as powerful (or even more so) if it is the result of a 'bottom-up', or peer-to-peer collaboration around a common interest. But it may be more open to circumstance whether the work of the network aligns with the priorities of the oragnisation.

- *What it is not*: it is different from a traditional organisational unit with reporting lines, 'control' and the ability to hold people to account; or project team which includes people from different areas, working within formal project management disciplines

- **Why this is more important now**: networks or communities of interest have existed as long as human beings. In the 1990s large (and often bureaucratic or hierarchical)

organisations found that silos, and formal command and control, were often less effective than informal groups in spreading expertise, enthusiasm and collaboration.

Today, in a world of social media, low trust in authority, and easy online connections, the idea is even more important and valuable and much easier to initiate or encourage.

The bright side: the 'lucky eight' common tips for success according to the experts

1. ***Design it to evolve naturally:*** by nature a successful informal network is dynamic, with interests, goals, and members subject to change. Start with those you have existing relationships with – who are natural allies or early adopters – and then build through their relationships.

2. ***Keep it an open community:*** create opportunities for outside perspectives to provoke thinking – including external speakers, case histories or other evidence. Also, assume that those less 'expert' have valuable insights and that experts (especially at the centre) will learn. In principle don't exclude anyone who wants to join, or set an arbitrary limit on numbers. It is better to have too many rather than too few.

3. ***Welcome and allow different levels of participation:*** there are usually 2 levels of participation and it makes sense to consciously manage it this way, and assume there will be:

   - *Core group* – those that participate actively in the network through discussions and projects and volunteer to do work between meetings. These will always be the minority, but ideally should see individuals join and leave.

   - *Wider network* – those that attend regularly, are more passive although still influenced by the group. These will be the majority and as long as they are turning up then you will be at the very least extending your influence.

   It is worth being transparent, clear and straightforward about expectations from individuals in these categories. 'Role definitions' may not feel right, but clear agreements and expectations around tasks and timings are a good idea.

4. ***Develop public and private spaces:*** While networks typically work openly where all members share, discuss and explore ideas, there should also be an encouragement to have private exchanges, one-to-one, or create sub-groups which can also very valuable. This can include, in terms of online resource, having areas that are not visible or accessible to everyone, alongside the main collaboration site and tools.

5. ***Keep focused on the common interest and value to all:*** networks should create opportunities for development and participation with the agenda flexible to people's needs. There may be a 'central' agenda that lies behind it all, but the more it can be

adapted to meet the differing requirements of individuals, the more value and buy-in are created.

6. ***Combine familiarity and excitement:*** combine and mix the regular agenda items (that repeat core subjects) with surprise guests, spontaneous brainstorms ("*Does anyone have a problem we can all help solve?"*) as well as unplanned discussion. This way, members come to realise that they might miss something even when the agenda looks less interesting to them, while ensuring that everything does not become too formulaic. It also keeps the 'parent-child' relationship at bay, as people feel empowered to influence the shape of a discussion.

7. ***Find and nurture a regular rhythm:*** members need to know when they are meeting, and how it works, but frequency and format should flexibly adapt to the needs and context of the people and the issues.

8. ***Keep it interactive:*** some face-to-face time makes a big difference where possible (especially at the start of networks). Use online and telephone methods that are interactive and try and keep centrally driven email downloads to a minimum. Above all, show that there is plenty of listening by adapting and improving ideas, plans and material – as well as the agendas for meetings – in response to input from members. Also, share out the roles in meetings and other events.

The dark side: why networks and communities go wrong

- ***Imperialism***: the temptations of ownership and control from the centre – as if it is another formal structure based on authority and accountability.

- ***Cliques***: the growth of bias, comfort zones and politics of self-interest where certain sub-groups are allowed to dominate, minorities are silenced and some agendas or issues always seem to win in favour of others

- ***Dogmatism***: a network that is ruled by inflexibility, a sense of infallibility from the 'centre' and the common bureaucracy of big organisations. All of this will crush the life out of the idea

- ***Short-termism***: there are sometimes temptations to drive the focus of a network on today's crisis, the latest noise coming from the CEO, or what is on people's mind that day. All of this is appropriate and good. However if that means that there is never quite the time to develop new ideas, build capability and improve things for the long term then this is the triumph of urgency over importance.

The evidence is that informal networks work best when they supplement a formal structure – when working well they allow leaders more influence and insight than any formal one.

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Sources

Sources used for this article include: Hughes, Jewson, Unwin: *Communities of Practice – Critical Perspectives* (Universities of London, Cardiff, Brunel); Eckert: *Communities of Practice*; Murillo*: Communities of Practice in the business and organisation studies literature* (Instituto Tecnologico de Mexico); Saint-Onge, Wallace: *Leveraging Communities of Practice for Strategic Advantage.* Wenger: *Communities of Practice* (Institute for Research on Learning, California); Wenger, McDermott, Snyder: *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*; Wenger, Snyder: *Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier* (Harvard Business Review); *Collaboration* (Economist Intelligence Unit survey).