

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 allows organisations to make more of informal networks of people that cross silos - and improve collaboration, problem-solving and influence better and faster than traditional organisation structures. And they can be built just as deliberately. We looked at the best known material on networks and communities of interest to summarise ideas and best practice.

- **Purpose of a network or community:** to extend influence over people that a leader has no line authority over, across organisational borders, to build knowledge, buy-in and capability on priority issues. Voluntary and 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 a business wants to be, the more valuable networks are.
- **What it is not:** a traditional organisational unit with reporting lines, 'control' and the ability to hold people to account; or project team with people from different areas, with formal project discipline.

The bright side: lucky eight tips for successful networks or communities of interest

1. **Design it to evolve naturally:** a network is dynamic, with interests, goals, and members subject to change. Start with existing relationships, build through new ones.
2. **Keep it an open community:** create opportunities for outside perspectives (to provoke thinking); assume those less 'expert' have valuable insights. Don't exclude anyone.
3. **Welcome and allow different levels of participation:** usually 2 levels of participation
 - *Core group* - participate actively in the network through discussions and projects
 - *Wider network* - attend regularly, more passive although still influenced by the group
4. **Develop public and private spaces:** While mainly working openly – to share, discuss and explore ideas - private exchanges, one-to-one, or sub-groups are also very valuable
5. **Keep focused on the common interest and value to all:** networks should create opportunities for development, participation with the agenda flexible to people's needs
6. **Combine familiarity and excitement:** mix regular agenda items with surprise guests and spontaneous brainstorming ("Does anyone have a problem we can all help solve?")
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 needs and context.
8. **Keep it interactive:** some face-to-face time where possible, share online communities, and keep down email to a minimum, and share out roles to widen involvement.

The dark side: why networks and communities go wrong

- **Imperialism:** the temptations of ownership and control from the centre
- **Cliques:** the growth of bias, comfort zones and the politics of self-interest
- **Dogmatism:** ruled by inflexibility, infallibility and bureaucracy – crushing life out of it
- **Short-termism:** the triumph of urgency over importance (from the centre's point of view)

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.