Making the most of roles of people

How roles can best be managed in community business peer networks?

Disclaimer

This briefing is a summary of various resources. You should not take the information provided here as a given: the concepts and theories we found useful may or may not apply to your network. We also acknowledge that similar theories and concepts appear in systems change, community organising and social change literature.

If you find yourself disagreeing with or questioning some of the points in this briefing, please make a note of it, as there will be an opportunity to discuss during our online session.

How to use this resource

Reading this document front-to-back may be a bit of an information overload. It might be easier to dip in and out of it according to your interests and current network issues. If you would rather read the whole thing one go - that's also great!

This resource aims to:

- Provide background for your first online session on 26th April
- Support you in learning about online platforms and their uses in peer networks

Below is a table of contents that will help you navigate this briefing. Each section gives an overview of the topic and then poses some questions that you may want to think about in relation to your own network.

We hope you find this useful, happy reading!

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Aim: Explore how different roles can be nurtured, supported and fulfilled

How do we make the most of roles in peer networks?

Peer networks are made up of equals (peers) - but for a network to keep running, a variety of different tasks need to be completed. If all peers are equal, how do we decide who does what, and how do we ensure the work gets done?

This briefing explores the more dynamic side of 'roles'. It does not aim to provide lots of information but to stimulate reflection and discussion about what roles mean and how they can be managed in the context of community business peer networks.

Roles of people

Here is a quick recap from our session about roles:

- Roles are a combination of the **functions** people perform in a network and the **position** they are in in the network (i.e. how many connections they have, whether they are on the periphery or centre of the network)
- These roles usually **depend on people's resources, skills and interests**
- Roles can be taken on by both **people** and **organisations**
- Being aware of the roles people are taking on as well as having processes in place to manage role dynamics are key aspects of maintaining good peer network dynamics

With great responsibility (or roles) comes great power…

Is everyone still a peer when network members have clearly defined roles and responsibilities? The [P2P Foundation](#) described peer networks as webs of relationships where **everyone has equal power**, **but not necessarily exactly the same functions**, knowledge or authority (based e.g. on knowledge, or the ability to perform a task to a given deadline).

How do we ensure power does not get monopolised in a peer network? One way to do this is to have mechanisms in place for role rotations.

- Aside from rotating roles regularly, are there other ways to ensure power is evenly distributed across the network?

Role transitions

If we assume role rotations can be a useful tool in maintaining a healthy peer network, then we should also ask: how do we make role transition as effective and stress-free as possible?

You might want to consider the following:

- **Establishing and agreed process for passing on roles** e.g. have a pre-established rota, send email reminder to the whole group, have a shared filing/ calendar system to pass on tasks and responsibilities
- **Ensure transitions are voluntary** e.g. through clear communication
- **Ensure members who might have less power or confidence feel comfortable in stepping up to roles**

Question

- Do you have processes in place in your network to ensure role transitions are smooth, and if so, what are they?

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How do you ensure roles are fulfilled?

In other words: how can all members of the peer network feel empowered to take on the roles best suited to them? Here are some of the aspects we think are important in building a healthy network where members feel compelled to contribute their time and skills:

- **Building trust and social capital**: create an environment where people trust each other enough to communicate openly and frankly about successes and failures.
- **Providing rewards:** often even an intangible reward like public recognition will make people feel proud of the work and compelled to do their bit for the network.
- **Ensuring flexibility**: few people would want to play an admin role forever! Ensure people know if and when there will be a transition.

Question

- How do you encourage people to take on and fulfil the tasks required by their role?

Conclusion

Talking about roles can be hard, particularly because of their correlation to power. However making these dynamics explicit and thinking about processes to improve them is key to making the most of roles in peer networks.

We look forward to hearing your thoughts and experiences!

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