Devolving power and leadership in networks

Disclaimer

This briefing is a summary of various resources (listed below). 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 online session on 8th March
- Support you in learning about ways of devolving power and leadership in networks and accessing further reading and resources

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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1. Introduction: what is 'power' in a network?

In the last briefing, we talked about what 'power' might mean. If power is the 'ability to do something in a particular way', or 'to influence the behaviour of others or the course of events' - what does this mean for people acting as part of a network?

2. Types of power in networks

According to Spanish sociologist [Manuel Castells](#), we can understand power in networks in four different ways:

- **Networking power**: the power of those who are included within the network, as opposed to those who are excluded from it.
  e.g. those who have access to the Internet vs. those who don't

- **Network power**: power exercised by imposing rules of inclusion in the network
  e.g. restricting membership to a network

- **Networked power**: power of social actors over other social actors in the network. There are specific processes and forms of power that keep this in place in each network. e.g. hierarchies in an organisation or company

- **Network-making power**: the power to build specific networks according to the interests and values of the builders, and the power to switch different networks following strategic alliances between dominant actors of various networks.
  e.g. setting network or organisational vision and strategies

You might find it interesting to take some time to explore the first two concepts by asking yourself and your members:

- **Who is included in, and excluded from, your network? Why is this?**

- **How is inclusion in the network decided? Are there actors in your network who hold particular power over these decisions?**

In this briefing, we'll be focusing more on the two latter forms of power: 'networked power' and 'network-making power'. We'll be looking at questions like:

- **How do people exercise power within their network?**

- **How and why does power shift within networks?**

3. Location, location, location

Much like in real estate, location is an important indicator in networks. While in real estate we look at geographic location, in networks we look at 'virtual' location - this is determined by your connections and those around you.

Valdis Krebs breaks down the factors that give people **informal power** within a network:

1. '**Betweenness**', or control someone has over the flows in the network. How often are they the link to other actors in the network?

2. '**Closeness**', or, how easily can someone access what is available via the network? How quickly can a person (or a node) reach all others in the network?

When a network member has a high degree of both factors, they have easy access to others whilst also controlling access of other nodes in the network. In Krebs' words, this means they have high 'informal power'.

4. Mapping networks: where does the power lie?

Now we have a rough idea of what power might look like in networks, how do we understand where it's located? Network maps can provide a useful 'bigger picture' view of actors and dynamics in your network. This is especially true when they are co-produced by members of as many different groups in the network as possible.

By using network maps you could:

- Identify and improve flows of information
- Increase awareness of connections and encourage people to take responsibility for a more effective network
- Develop network leadership

[From June Holley (2012), The Network Weaver Handbook]

So how do you draw up a network map? Perhaps the two most common ways of producing a network map are by hand-drawing it or through social network analysis software. Below we have selected two examples of processes for network mapping.

Net-Map Toolbox
Net-Map is an interview-based mapping tool that helps people understand, visualize, discuss, and improve situations in which many different actors influence outcomes.
By creating Influence Network Maps, individuals and groups can clarify their own view of a situation, foster discussion, and develop a strategic approach to their networking activities. More specifically, Net-Map helps players to determine:
- What actors are involved in a given network,
- How they are linked,
- How influential they are, and
- What their goals are

Read more and download the toolkit.

Social Network Analysis Handbook (International Rescue Committee)

This resource guides you through the social network mapping process step by step. It helps network members think about: where power is located in the network and how this affects flows, blockages and network dynamics and outcomes. It is particularly focused on creating change within the network and in the wider context.

Below are some of the common issues and opportunities that you can identify by creating this type of network map:

Issues	Opportunities
Dependency on single actors or funding. Dysfunctional / conflicting relationships may impede the entire network. Marginalisation of people or groups due to factors such as class, gender, ethnicity or other factors. Disincentives for change may be preventing change from happening. Like-me relationships occur where members tend to stick with others similar to them - this may affect the network's structure and impact.	Critical relationship building can be an 'easy win' i.e. connecting actors with influence in the network. Tap into underutilized support often takes the form of giving voice and empowering 'champions' in the network who are positive about change but who have not been given a role or sufficient voice within the proposed intervention. Building networks within the network can be a good way to strengthen coalitions of people within the network who are positive about the proposed change.

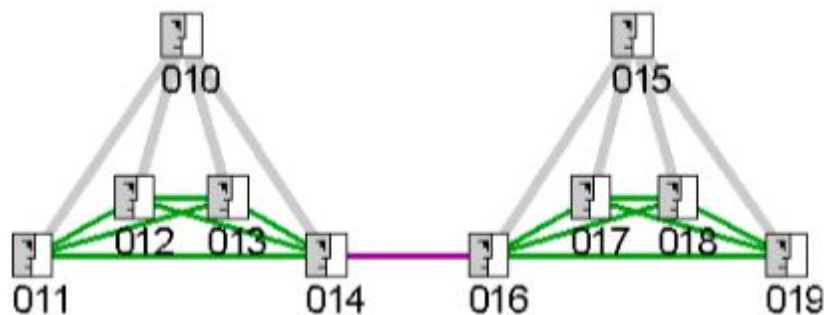| Structural challenges such as overly centralised networks or structural splits.	

[Read the guide and access additional resources](#).

5. How does power shift?

In his paper [Power in Networks](#), Valdis Krebs explains that collaboration reduces individual dominance. When new connections are formed, the flow of information is less constrained and everyone has less control over it. "When everyone is connected to everyone else, no one stands out", says Krebs. Below we look at how people use connections to shift their networks' power structures.

5.1 Networks and hierarchies: a power struggle?

Networks and hierarchies are not mutually exclusive structures. For example, an organisation may involve formal connections, best represented by a hierarchy, but also include informal connections, best visualised as a network. Below is an example; grey lines represent formal relationships, green and purple lines are informal relationships.

From *Power in Networks*, Valdis Krebs

5.2 Strategies to gain informal power

As we outlined above, changing the pattern of connections in a network is the most straight-forward way of changing power distribution. To create new connections you can either:

- **Connect *within* your organisation or group.** In centralised structures such as hierarchies or [hub-and-spoke](#), power belongs to those at the centre, who control connections and resources. "As the disconnected start to connect, power becomes more distributed", says Krebs.

- **Connect outside of your organisation or group.** This is sometimes called 'boundary-spanning'. When one person links up with someone outside of the organisation or group, this not only increases their power rankings but also increases power in the whole group. However, as more bridges are created, the individual advantage of being part of a bridge begins to diminish.

6. Distributing power - in practice

Now that we have looked at what power may look like in networks and how its shifts occur, we 'zoom in' to look at what this means in practice, for both individuals and groups.

6.1 What is a network leader?

> *"When the best leader's work is done the people say, 'We did it ourselves.'"*
>
> Lao-Tzu

Whilst the traditional narrative in organisations is about leaders as heroic individuals who charismatically lead their teams to success, the case with networks is quite different. Generally, when power is distributed across the network, information and ideas can flow more easily - and this helps the network thrive. **If power is concentrated in the hands of one individual** - however charismatic and judicious - **there may be some problems with flows of information, knowledge and innovative ideas.**

So are networks and leadership fundamentally opposed concepts? The short answer is: not really. In fact, much has been written on network leadership. The compromise is that network leaders 'serve' the network rather than dominating it. Because **networks thrive when members trust each other and feel comfortable working together**, much of the work of network leaders involves empowering others and creating and nurturing relationships between people.

Further resources:

A new approach to network leadership

The Most Impactful Leaders You've Never Heard Of

6.1.1. Network vs. organisational leadership

Looking at the differences between organisational and network leadership can be helpful in understanding what the latter actually entails. Below we offer some viewpoints on this distinction.

Perhaps the most important commodity for this new conception of leadership to take hold is trust. Leaders in hierarchies rely on chains of command and clear lines of accountability to ensure that the 'right' decisions are made, and the 'right' people censured if they fail. Network leadership rejects that model of authority, and the blame games it promotes.

But **network leaders nonetheless carry responsibility, in particular to preserve the trust on which their networks depend**. In an unpredictable world in which some failures are almost bound to happen, that is a tough challenge. Acknowledging the depth of our interdependence with others, and the limited capacity of our leaders to manage it, will be a frightening experience. It is much more convenient to think that leaders will be saviours – and that we have someone to blame when things do not go our way. But if it wakes us up to the potential within each of us to solve our own problems, then so much the better.

Source: P. Skidmore, Leading between: leadership and trust in a network society

June Holley helpfully summarises the distinction between organisational and network leadership in a table:

Organisational Leadership	Network Leadership
- Position, authority - Few leaders - Leader broadcasts - Leader tells what to do - Leader controls - Small group in the know - Directive - Top down - Leader ensures tasks completed	- Role, behaviour - Everyone a leader - Leader engages - Many people initiate - Leader facilitates and supports - Openness & Transparency - Emergent - Bottom-up

- Individual - Evaluation - Planning - Provides service	- Leader helps identify breakthroughs - Small group - Reflection - Innovation and Experimentation - Supports self-organisation

Source: J. Holley, The Network Weaver Handbook (2012)

In the book Connecting to Change the World, an interesting personality difference is highlighted between traditional business executives and network leaders:

> **Network Leader Personality Traits**
> **[NB: Please do not share this list outside of the CoP!]**
> Plastrik, Taylor and Cleveland provide an interesting list of personality traits that can be adapted and drawn upon as needed. Stang, the psychologist who developed the list, noted that key differences between network leaders and high-level business positions included:
> - **Modesty**: "for a network coordinator modesty is seen as essential. This person has to be comfortable being behind the scenes. They connect the dots, and they don't always get credit for that"
> - **Openness to experience**: A network coordinator has to be open to all different kinds of ideas. They have to work with different personalities and be open to many paths to success - they don't have a map in front of them."
>
> Source: P. Plastrik, M. Taylor and J. Cleveland, Connecting to Change the World (2014)

Some questions to think about:

- How do you feel about the distinction between organisational and network leadership?

- Do you think these values are embodied in your network?

- Is there anything you disagree with or would like to add to the above?

6.1.2 What do network leaders do?

The above gives us a better idea of what network leadership is about conceptually. But what does this mean in practice? Below we summarise two possible models.

The first model is the Institute for Conservation Leadership's practices for net-centric leadership:

> **Catalyzes a culture of spirited cooperation**
> 1. Listens deeply to fully appreciate and understand the diversity of perspectives and motivations held by all involved.

2. Shows gratitude and encourages mutual appreciation for the ideas and contributions of all.
3. Regularly uses both/and thinking to identify solutions that meet both shared and individual goals and needs.
4. Communicates openly and clearly, matching the medium to the message.
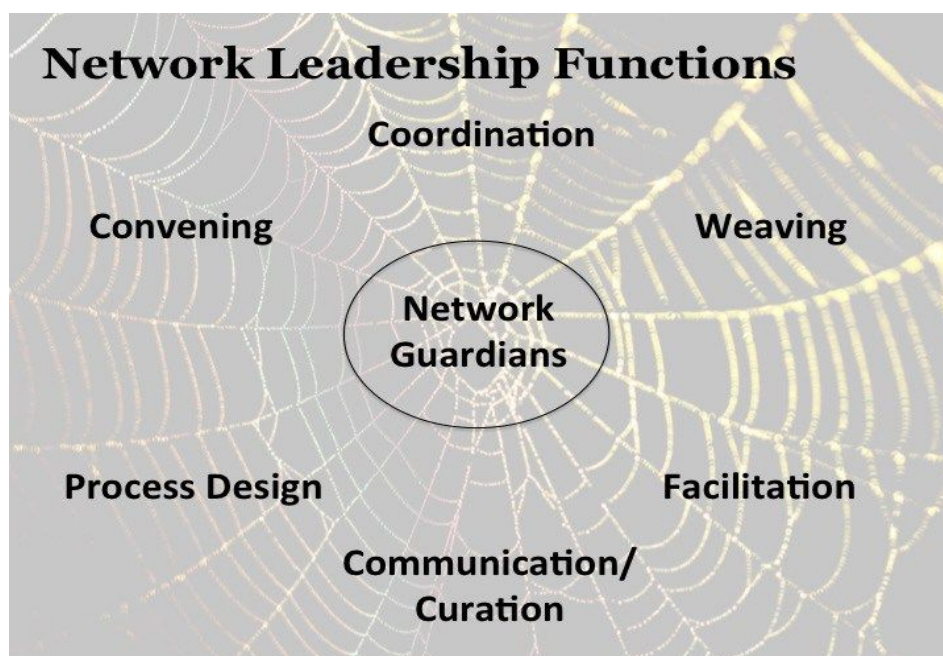5. Fosters opportunities (at all levels of the system) to develop camaraderie and trust

Shares power and generates momentum
6. Creates space for others to step up and contribute
7. Embraces ambiguity and encourages experiments and innovations
8. Helps the group to develop enough infrastructure to effectively make decisions and keeps everyone moving forward
9. Pays attention to conflicts in values and beliefs and productively orchestrates resolution

Stays true to the long-term vision while navigating frequent twists and turns
10. Persistently holds a clear picture of the purpose for working together
11. Helps those inside and outside the collaborative effort understand the progress that is being made as well as the roots of that success.
12. Courageously continues to adapt in an effort to successfully achieve the long-term vision.

The second model is based on the Interaction Institute's view that **leaders 'hold the whole'**. They pay attention to what will be required to ensure resiliency or change for more equitable and sustainable benefits. More specifically, network leaders carry out the following functions:

Here is a little more detail about each function:

- **Coordination**: Creating and maintaining a support infrastructure, scheduling common meeting times and ensuring people's access to resources.
- **Convening**: Providing social capital and connections to pull people together and some of the resources to support a given initiative. E.g. foundations, government, academic institutions, community-based organisations
- **Process design**: Mapping out a pathway (meetings research, stakeholder outreach) that help move a wider group of stakeholders from vision to action. Usually a diverse group of people representing different parts of the network.
- **Communication/ Curation**: Helping to create and fulfil a variety of channels so that people can stay connected, share freely and learn in timely ways. Keeping the network humming by managing information.
- **Facilitation**: Holding the space for difficult and productive conversations, listening to the wisdom of the group, helping to build alignment and agreement, and balancing structured discussion with openness for emergent possibilities.
- **Weaving**: helping people identify their interests and challenges, connecting people strategically where there's potential for mutual benefit, and serving as a catalyst for self-organising groups.

Other functions also include :
- **Provocation**: A formal or informal role filled by a person who can ask the otherwise unasked questions, challenge a group or initiative when it is reaching agreement too easily or getting too comfortable and safe with its work. Stimulates new and bold thinking.
- **Implementation/ Prototyping**: Running with nascent and promising ideas, experimenting and honing as they go. Prototyping often occurs at the edges of larger projects in the form of new partnerships and conversations going off and trying new things.

Source: Network Leadership Roles 2.0

Many other models of leadership are available for you to explore and test. **Here are some useful resources to have a look at for this purpose:**

- What does a network leader do?

- How to embody the network leadership mindset

6.1.3 Examples of network leadership

Below are some examples from June Holley's Network Weaver Handbook, which closely relate to the Interaction Institute model, and others from the Stanford Social Innovation Review.

Weaving: Closing triangles

Sue manages an active online community called the Community Clinic Voice. A community member recently asked for a sample Request for Proposals that had been developed to be used to get bids for a building project. Having a sample to work from would save the organisation a lot of time coming up with one on its own.

Sue didn't have such a sample proposal, but she knew someone who she thought might have one, and she introduced them to each other in an email. That person knew of yet another party who had what was needed and connected those two individuals. "You all rock!" was the grateful comment of the requester after receiving just what she needed.

Source: J. Holley, The Network Weaver Handbook (2012)

Coordination: Catalysing the PlantRight Network

Sustainable Conservation catalysed a series of events and collaborations aimed at preventing the proliferation of invasive plant species. They did this by thoroughly researching the horticultural market, learning who its leaders were, then organising meetings and fostering collaboration.

"Involving stakeholders from across the whole system, from the beginning, has not only better informed our strategy, but also enabled diverse groups to embrace the outcome—importantly, without the feeling of winners and losers that results from a more adversarial approach. In addition, our partners have helped extend the commitment to keep invasive plants out of the nursery trade by opening doors and lending a sense of credibility to our efforts that would have taken us far longer to achieve on our own."
Read more

Facilitative leadership: Discovery Initiative

The Discovery Initiative is a network which aims to ensure that Connecticut children from all races and income levels are ready for school at age five and successful learners by age nine. While some courses of action were straight-forward, others required difficult conversations to take place around racial inequality. Their efforts to be facilitative leaders were rewarded:

"We played an important role in creating safe spaces for open conversation about structural and systemic challenges. We played a lead role in designing and

Some questions to think about:

- Are these activities carried out in your network? If so, who takes responsibility for them?
- Are there any network leadership activities that you feel are currently not being undertaken or that should be passed on to others?
- Would you add any other network leadership activities to the ones list above?

6.2 Fitting it all together: Self-Organising

Now we've looked at the different roles of network leadership, it's time to see how they all fit in together. In the last briefing we looked at ways of organising networks and organisations into 'flat' structures. But how do these flat and anti-hierarchical structures actually function in real life? A useful concept in understanding this is self-organising.

Self-organising occurs in well-connected networks, where many people are involved in the process of leading a network. The process works roughly as follows:

- Individuals begin to identify something that could make a difference e.g. a new research project, service, policy, festival, handbook, campaign, playground etc.
- That individual or group pulls together additional people who also want to work to make that change
- Together they attract the resources needed to make something happen
- Learning from that experiment is fed back into the network
- Projects get larger as the community gains knowledge

6.2.1. Examples of self-organising

Scrum or Agile

Self-organizing has been used successfully for decades in software development, where it is called scrum or agile. With the goal of producing a specific software, the self-organised team figures out what needs to be done and individuals volunteer for specific tasks.

Networking hubs

Places where people run into each other, share information, and cook up things to do together are called networking hubs. Such places serve as face-to-face platforms for self-organising.

Innovation funds

The Race, Gender and Human Rights Fund of the Women's Fund of California set up a pool of funds for their criminal justice work and asked 10 activist organisations to get together and jointly determine the priorities for action. Then they were asked to submit collaborative grants to the fund to address those priorities.

6.2.3 Moving to self-organising

Self-organising require network members to act differently than they would in a more hierarchical setting with set tasks and to-do lists. Here are four steps to move to self-organising in your network:

1. **Awareness of interests and opportunities**: people need to learn how to identify what they are interested in working on and recognise opportunities that exist to make a difference in that area right now.
2. **Clustering for collaboration**: People need to find others who are interested in the same opportunity area.
3. **Coordination**: They need to learn how to coordinate projects (and they will need coaching and support in most cases to do this well).
4. **Sharing and reflection**: They need to get in the habit of sharing widely about what is happening in their project so that everyone in the network is aware of what is going on.

N.B.: The section above is heavily based on June Holley's Network Weaver Handbook - for further info and resources click here.

Some questions to think about:

- What could be the pros and cons of self-organising? Are there any obstacles that jump out to you?

7. Conclusion

Congratulations for getting to the end of this information-packed briefing! To re-cap, we explored:

- What is power in networks?

- How do we understand where power lies?

- How does power shift?

- What does our understanding of power in networks mean for our approach to leadership? And what does it mean for our approach to working in groups?

In advance of our session on 8th March, it would be great if you could note down:

- Which ideas particularly resonated with you?

- Do you think understanding power in networks will help you gain a better sense of dynamics in your own network?

- Can you identify network leadership or self-organising in your network? If not, would you like to see more of this?

Thank you for reading - see you at the online session on 8th March at 10:30am!

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