Roles of people 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 first online session on 14th December at 10:30am
- Support you in learning about the roles people play 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!

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

This briefing is an overview on the different roles people can play in networks, and how these can be leveraged for greater impact.

The purpose of this briefing is to summarise various resources on this theme, so that you don't have to read them unless they are of particular interest to you. This is a list of the readings we have used to put together this briefing:

On building networks

- June Holley (2012), *The Network Weaver Handbook*. *A guide to transformational networks*.
- Valdis Krebs and June Holley (2006), *Building smart communities through Network Weaving*
- Patti Anklam (2011), *Network Roles*
- Peter Plastrik and Madeleine Taylor (2006), *Net Gains: A Handbook for Network Builders Seeking Social Change*

On the importance of social capital and trust in organisational networks:

- Karen Stephenson (2011), *Trafficking in Trust: the art and science of human networks* in Enlightened Power: how women are transforming the practice of leadership.
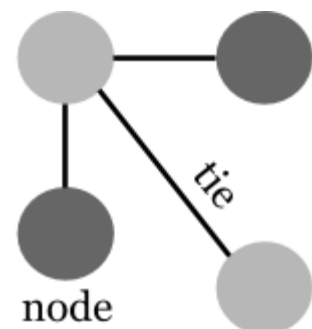
On organisations as part of movements and networks:

- Shiloh Turner, Kathy Merchant, John Kania & Ellen Martin (2012), *Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact* (Parts 1 - 4)
- Gideon Rosenblatt (2004), *Movement as Network. Connecting People and Organizations in the Environmental Movement*.
- Beth Kanter, (2010), *The Networked Nonprofit*

1.1 What do we mean by 'roles'?

A useful way of visualising networks is to think about them in terms of 'nodes' and 'ties'.

- Nodes can be people, groups or organisations.

- Ties can show relationships, flows or transactions.

Depending on the quantity and type of ties they have, **nodes fulfil different roles**.

1.2 Why are roles useful?

Roles can often make it easier to achieve collective action in networks. For example, they can help:

- Make good use of people's skillsets and aptitudes

- Organise collective action in networks

- Allow networks to grow or be self-sustaining

- Make it easier for knowledge to be transferred and for new ideas to emerge

When we analyse the state of our network, it can also be helpful to know what roles people play so that we can plan ahead strategically.

1.2.1 An example of effective roles in action

Brokers in the healthcare sector

Healthcare professionals found it challenging to transfer ideas and knowledge across siloes and 'professional tribes'. Good ideas were not travelling easily between groups. Some people started to act as 'brokers', facilitating the flow of knowledge. Brokers were people who regularly liaised across different groups. They played a key role in helping information to pass from one 'cluster' to the other. This resulted in more cross-group cooperation and communication.

To read the full paper: Long, Cunningham and Braithwaite (2012), Bridges, brokers and boundary spanners in collaborative networks: a systematic review

However useful, roles have their downsides. Brokers in the example above, for example, could find themselves overwhelmed by responsibility as 'gatekeepers' of knowledge. This is why it's important to think about how roles can not only be taken on, but also passed on.
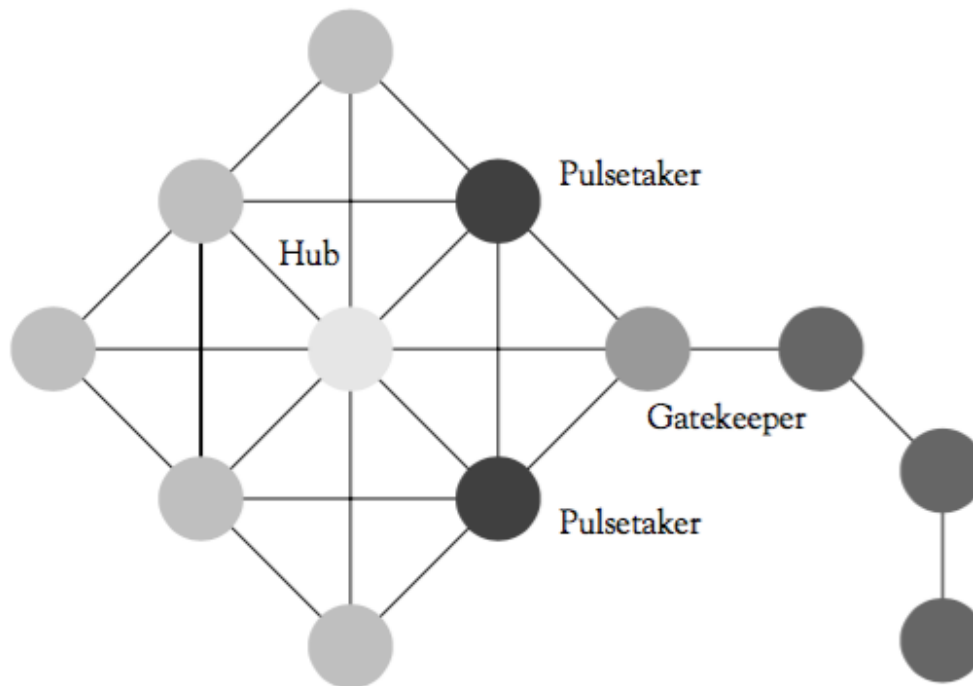
2. Roles in networks

We found that people looked at roles in two main ways:

- The **position** they occupy in their network i.e. the quantity and quality of ties they have with other people or organisations
- The **function** they fulfil in their network, or the activities they carry out e.g. creating new ties, reinforcing them, connecting to new people

2.1 People's position within networks

We found this diagram a helpful visual representation of the different places where people can position themselves within a network. Of course, this is a very simplified version of what a full network might look like. Karen Stephenson in her *Trafficking in Trust* chapter, uses this as

a way of analysing positions of power and influence within an organisation, but we think it can be applied to many other types of networks.

- A **hub** is someone who is very well socially connected. They tend to have the highest number of direct ties to others and hold many face-to-face conversations. They can juggle many activities, concepts and relationships and be effective information-spreaders within a network.

- A **gatekeeper** serves as an important link along critical connections of an organisations or between different networks. When information must pass through one person on the way to another, a gatekeeper is the conduit.

- A **pulsetaker** is connected through many indirect ties. They are almost the opposite of hubs - they are unseen but 'all-seeing'. They have a lot of influence, much of it is subtle. They are well versed in the culture of the organisation.

Other roles you might want to think about, outside of the immediate core of your network:
- **Boundary spanners**, or **connectors** connect two or more clusters. They act as bridges between groups.

- **Peripheral Specialists** and **Lurkers** are loosely connected to the network. Peripheral specialists provide important expertise to the group. Lurkers absorb more than they share.
- **Broadcasters**, quite simply, broadcast information outside their group.

> **These concepts are drawn from:**
> - Patti Anklam (2011), *Network Roles*
> - Karen Stephenson (2011), *Trafficking in Trust: the art and science of human networks* in Enlightened Power: how women are transforming the practice of leadership.

2.1.2 Questions to think about…

- Are there any advantages / disadvantages to being in a certain position in the network?
- Could 'negatively' positioned people like lurkers be put to good use?

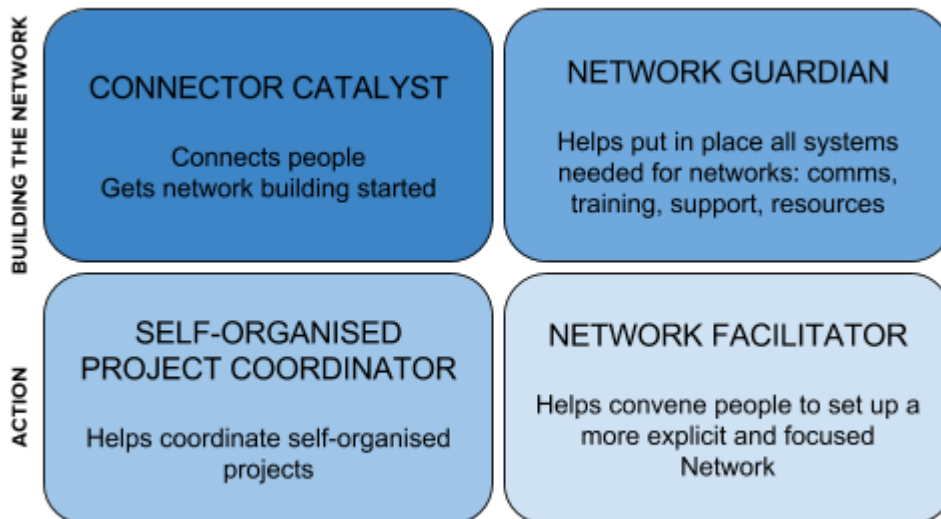## 2.2 People's functions in networks

Some key characteristics of healthy, thriving networks include:

- **Strong links** between people. This may be through common attributes, goals or governance, shared value, purpose and/ or experience.
- **Diversity** makes networks more vibrant and increases innovation.
- **Many paths between any two nodes**. If several nodes or links are damaged or removed, other pathways exist to safeguard the information flow.
- **Some nodes are more prominent than others**, either as hubs, gatekeepers or boundary spanners

> **These criteria were adapted from:**
> - Valdis Krebs and June Holley (2006), *Building smart communities through Network Weaving*

How can network members contribute to keeping the network healthy? In the *Network Weaver Handbook*, June Holley provides an example of the activities people might carry out to ensure their network stays healthy and thriving.

Adapted from *Network Leadership* in *The Network Weaver Handbook* by June Holley

- **Network Connectors** identify undeveloped aspects of the network and work to strengthen them. One of the key activities they carry out is 'closing triangles', or connecting people and figuring out how they might help each other, until they can do that independently.

- **Project Coordinators** come into play when enough people in a network know each other and collaborative projects start to emerge. They catalyse and coordinate teams, and coach other project coordinators.

- **Network Facilitators** help groups of people with a common interest or issue to come together and set up a more formal network. First, they gather a group. Then, they help the network develop an appropriate structure and help coordinate action through engagement and organisation. Finally, facilitators make sure network relationships are resilient.

- **Network Guardians** have a bird's eye view of the network, meaning they can see what the whole network needs to function more effectively. Network guardians 'listen' to the network and help fine-tune network systems.

Other functions include:
- **Steward**: informally helps build the network as a member of the network, not as a formal function within the network.
- **Coach**: advises others about best to perform their roles in building networks.

- **Funder**: provides initial resources for network organisation. Supports connections, alignment and coordination of the network. May play the role of initial organiser.[1]

Find out more about the different functions and activities people carry out in networks in:
- June Holley (2012), *The Network Weaver Handbook. A guide to transformational networks*.
- Peter Plastrik and Madeleine Taylor (2006), *Net Gains: A Handbook for Network Builders Seeking Social Change*.

2.2.1 Questions to think about…

- Which functions are currently being carried out in your network, and which would you like to see more of?
- Are any positions described in Section 2.1 particularly appropriate to carry out any of the functions described in Section 2.2?

The Network Weaver Checklist

You might like to try out June Holley's *'Network Weaver Checklist'* to help you assess which functions you and the other members of your network are fulfilling.

Download and print the Checklist by following this link:
http://www.minnesotanonprofits.org/events-training/leadership-conference/2014-leadership-conference-handouts/Network_Mapping_3.pdf

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2.3 Organisations' functions in networks

Understanding what roles different parts of the network play is equally as relevant for organisations as it is for individuals. Is it useful for organisations to have clearly established roles? Here are two examples to start exploring this question.

2.3.1 Backbone Organisations

According to the Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR), mobilising collective impact is most useful in cases where 'isolated impact' does not work. Whilst isolated impact is the result of organisations competing for funding, acting alone and highlighting their own role in achieving results whilst overlooking other variables, achieving **collective impact** operates on the

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[1] For a fuller discussion of the role of funders in networks, read *Chapter 13: Role of funders* in Peter Plastrik and Madeleine Taylor (2006), *Net Gains: A Handbook for Network Builders Seeking Social Change*.

assumption that "large-scale social change comes from better cross-sector coordination rather than from the isolated intervention of individual organisations"[2]. Indeed, collective impact is most useful in complex situations that benefit from different actors connecting and working together.

From *Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact*

We think networks have a key role in achieving collective impact. Particularly important players in this are 'backbone organisations'.

Backbone organisations work as a 'backbone' of support for movements and networks trying to achieve collective impact. Their activities include:

- Guiding vision and strategy
- Supporting aligned activities
- Establishing shared measurement practices
- Building public will
- Advancing policy
- Mobilising funding

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[2] John Kania & Maria Kramer (2011), *Collective Impact*, Stanford Social Innovation Review.

Their value lies in their democratic nature and strategic thinking in bringing together and catalysing toward action. However one key challenge they face is being 'spread out thin', particularly when staff capacity is lacking.[3]

> **Read more about Collective Impact and the role of Backbone Organisations:**
> - Shiloh Turner, Kathy Merchant, John Kania & Ellen Martin (2012), *Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact* (Parts 1 - 4)

2.3.2 Organisations in the Environmental Movement network

Another example of how organisations can play key roles in networks comes from Gideon Rosenblatt's work on the environmental movement[4]. He views it as a network made up of organisations focused on either people, solutions or resources.

People Organisations	Serve distinct audiences. Reach out to various segments of society and help them build appropriate connections with environmental causes.
Solution Organisations	Define themselves by the issue they focus on and by their particular approach to solving it. House the movement's issue-related technical and policy expertise. Play a critical role in ensuring that ecologically important issues receive focus even if they do not draw large constituent bases.
Resource Organisations	Define themselves by the particular expertise or resources they bring to the rest of the network. Develop unique expertise and resources and deploy these throughout the network to raise its collective effectiveness.

Adapted from G. Rosenblatt (2014), *Movement as Network*

By distinguishing these three organisational roles, we can rethink relationships between environmental organisations and perhaps ways to restructure the whole movement to make it more powerful and integrated.

> **Read about Gideon Rosenblatt's analysis of the environmental movement here:**
> - Gideon Rosenblatt (2004), *Movement as Network. Connecting People and Organizations in the Environmental Movement*.

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[3]Further reading and examples of Backbone Organisations are available in Shiloh Turner, Kathy Merchant, John Kania & Ellen Martin (2012), *Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact* (Parts 1 - 4)

[4] Gideon Rosenblatt (2004), *Movement as Network. Connecting People and Organizations in the Environmental Movement*.

- What role is your organisation playing in your network? What about other organisations?
- Is it helpful to establish roles for organisations to work together more effectively?

3. How are roles taken on and passed on?

We found that people tend to take on the roles outlined above depending on their skill-set, abilities, availability and circumstances.

When a network first starts up, one person or organisation will most likely have to take responsibility to connect and organise others. As the network grows, however, others will likely need to take on more responsibility and specific roles. Passing on roles can also help distribute power more evenly across the network.

A similar development is well illustrated by Bruce Hazard's story:

Bruce Hazard and the Maine Mountain Heritage Network

Several years ago, Bruce Hazard started a network in rural western Maine that grew and grew until it had more than 200 members working on "heritage-based" economic development for their region. "*This was a very exciting development: after you feel like you've been alone in the woods for long enough, to look out and see you've got some friends, some fellow travelers*," Hazard recalls.

He started to connect people, then realised it made sense to develop alignment around a plan for the network. "*We were able to talk to each other, but where were we going? We knew there were some opportunities to work together, but how should we be prioritizing and funneling, channeling the resources that we had so that we could be working together in a more productive way?*"

Hazard facilitated a planning process that involved some 200 people in the region. Then came a moment of truth. "*There we were, with this sort of loosely networked group of 200,*" Hazard recalls. "*We had a plan, which we all agreed with. But how were we going to get this plan done?*" The winning proposal was to stick with the network model—but to restructure it around the plan's goals and a set of short-term projects.

As the network grew, Hazard started convening a "steering committee" of members to help set the network's direction. He asked certain network members to help to coordinate the half-dozen projects the network was taking on and he brought the coordinators together to

share information with each other. Hazard was weaving links among network members and coordinating the work of the network.

Organizer, facilitator, coordinator, and coach—Bruce Hazard has worn all of the hats of a network builder except that of a funder. (He'd probably be willing to do that too, if he had the money.) He'd be the first to tell you that each role is different.

Read more about Bruce's work in:

- Peter Plastrik and Madeleine Taylor (2006), *Net Gains: A Handbook for Network Builders Seeking Social Change*, pp. 61-62.

Questions to think about…

- How are role transitions decided within a group or network?
- What makes role transitions hard, and how can they be made easier?
- How does your network know when it is the right time for a role transition?
- What is the role of power dynamics in taking on and passing on roles?

4. Using roles to improve networks

In chapter 2: Roles in networks we looked at the types of roles and activities people and organisations can take on in networks. So, when roles are being used effectively, what results can be achieved?

4.1 Roles and self-sustaining networks

Establishing clear roles for network members and making their value clear from the start can help make the network more resilient to change and challenges thanks to people's motivation to fulfil their responsibilities.

Moving away from dependence on a central hub can help develop skills in the network, create more opportunities for collaboration as well as strengthening the network should people move away or certain relationships deteriorate.

When more people are responsible for various activities that keep the network alive and healthy, there is more of a probability that **the burden will not fall on one individual**.

4.1.2 Questions to think about…

- How could you use roles within your network to make it more self-sustaining?
- What roles could match your network's strategic aims?

Read more about the roles of people in making networks self-sustaining in:

- Valdis Krebs and June Holley (2006), *Building smart communities through Network Weaving*.
- Peter Plastrik and Madeleine Taylor (2006), *Net Gains: A Handbook for Network Builders Seeking Social Change*, Chapter 12.

4.2 Roles and innovation in networks

Without proper coordination and 'weaving' of networks, similar people and organisations were found to stick together. However, **diversity is the key to new ideas**. While similarity builds trust, diversity in ideologies, background and approaches can introduce new ideas and perspectives. Valdis Krebs and June Holley advise: "connect on your similarity, and profit from your diversity"[5].

It's also interesting to note that relationships are the medium through which knowledge is exchanged. Trust is the glue that holds them together.[6] The key to working well and innovating in networks is for people to know others and to be comfortable connecting to them.

4.2.2 Questions to think about...

- How can more diversity be integrated in your network? How can this be balanced with trusting relationships?
- Could established roles actually stifle innovation in your network?

Read about the roles of people in facilitating innovation in networks in:

- Valdis Krebs and June Holley (2006), *Building smart communities through Network Weaving*
- June Holley (2012), *The Network Weaver Handbook*. *A guide to transformational networks*.
- Karen Stephenson (2011), *Trafficking in Trust: the art and science of human networks* in Enlightened Power: how women are transforming the practice of leadership.

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[5] Valdis Krebs and June Holley (2006), *Building smart communities through Network Weaving*
[6] Karen Stephenson (2011), *Trafficking in Trust: the art and science of human networks* in Enlightened Power: how women are transforming the practice of leadership.

4.3 How can we best manage roles?

We have seen that effective management of roles can help achieve results. But how is this done in practice?

Here are some key things to keep in mind:

- **Mapping networks** can help figure out which roles are lacking, or which are being over-exercised.
- **Un-bundling and weaving:** un-bundling duplicate activities in networks and weaving connections between isolated nodes is a key part of ensuring useful functions are being fulfilled but not duplicated.
- **Roles have advantages and disadvantages.** These should be considered when taking on and passing on roles.

These principles are drawn from:

- Gideon Rosenblatt (2004), *Movement as Network. Connecting People and Organizations in the Environmental Movement*.
- Valdis Krebs and June Holley (2006), *Building smart communities through Network Weaving*

4.3.1 Questions to think about...

- How do you manage roles in your network? Are there any other ways you could effectively do this?

Conclusion

We hope that this was a useful overview of the different ways you can think about roles in your networks. We talked about:

- Different roles people and organisations can play in networks
- How these roles are taken on and passed on
- The results that can be achieved by effectively using roles
- Some ways of managing roles in a network

What is clear is that there is no single way of leveraging the different roles people play to achieve results. Each network has its own way of working, and different roles may be more or less useful at different points in the network's life.

What is important is thinking about: what works for your network? What useful 'nuggets' of information could you apply in your own work?

Thank you for reading, we look forward to a lively discussion in our next online session!