
Supporting good practice and capacity development in 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 the next face-to-face session
- Support you in learning about building capacity and developing best practices in your 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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0 Context: Value Creation and Exchange

This is the first topic of the next theme we will be tackling in the peer networking programme: value creation and exchange. Value is a central aspect of peer networking. Without value, people would not join networks, let alone stay in them or be involved. Peer networks provide so many kinds of value that it is impossible to find in other settings.

The type of value you'll get out of a network depends on its purpose. When you're clear on your network's purpose and the value it creates for its members, it is then easier to measure impact. As you'll have guessed, value creation and exchange is central to a well functioning network that serves the needs of its members.

1 Definitions

What do we mean by 'supporting good practice' and 'capacity development'?

One of the key forms of 'intangible' value we can get out of peer networks is the emergence of good practices and opportunities for capacity development among people or groups doing the same thing, whether that is manufacturing cars, building software, or running community business networks.

'Good practice' and 'capacity development' can be quite obscure in terms of their actual meaning... Put simply:

- By **good practice** we mean "a technique or method that has proven to lead to a desired result".
- **Capacity building** is the "process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that people need for a desired result".

This excerpt is a great example of how this works in practice in peer networks:

In peer-to-peer networks, you are among people with similar challenges, issues, and problems. In that setting, the likelihood is huge that you'll benefit faster from exposure to their thinking, the problems they've solved, the mistakes they've made, their best practices and innovative ideas — and also the people they know.

It turns out that some of the keenest observers of peer-to-peer networks cite studies of apprenticeship when pointing to the unequaled value of peer networking. And here's why: apprentices learn better, faster, and deeper from other apprentices — especially when they're at different levels of experience. Hearing it from the mouths of someone who's been there — and recently — is often a more powerful learning experience than hearing it from the boss.

Q1: What's your definition of 'best practice' and 'capacity building' - what are some examples from your own work?

2 The benefits

Let's go a bit deeper and find out **how peer networking can help you build capacity and develop good practices**. We think some of the key ways this happens are:

- **Benchmarking** - evaluating the way you do something by comparing it with a standard. Peer networks are great for this because they bring together many people doing similar things - the perfect pool of resources to draw up a useful and realistic standard.
- **Discovering new solutions or tools:** it is likely that people in your peer network will have come against similar, if not the same problems and challenges as you have. It can be very useful to speak to someone who may have tackled the same problem with a different tool or solution and who can guide you through their approach.
- **Sector insights:** it's nearly impossible to stay abreast of all the latest trends in your sector - that is, without a peer network. Connecting with others with similar jobs or interests can be a helpful way of keeping up to speed on the latest news.
- **The motivational force of peer networking:** being part of a peer network really helps motivate people to excel at what they do. The group dynamic helps keep people accountable, as well as provide a set of supportive relationships in times of struggle.
- **Constructive criticism** from someone who is 'in the same boat' can also be a very powerful tool for strengthening people's skills and challenge unhelpful assumptions.

Q2: In what specific ways does your peer network encourage the development of good practice and help its members build capacity?

3 Case studies

Here are some practical examples of how peer networking can support the development of good practice and how it can build capacity in a variety of sectors.

A peer network for Personal Health Budget users

A personal health budget (PHB) is an amount of money to support a person's identified health and wellbeing needs, planned and agreed between the person and their local NHS team.

To support patients in using this new tool, the NHS create a core group of people with lived experience of personal health budgets who could share information and advice through

When asked “*Why is a peer network important to you?*”, PHB users answered:

- To give something back and to help those who need the assistance that I did, and still do sometimes.
- Learning from others’ experiences.
- Shared values and a determination to make it happen.
- More power in numbers.
- Breaking the sense of isolation.
- Enables us to have a real influence.
- Meeting like-minded people.
- Sharing information – being kept up to date with what’s going on.
- Being seen as the experts we are.
- Honest and open conversations.
- Opportunities to speak at national events.
- Challenges the views of people and makes them rethink.
- Test out ideas in a safe space.
- Feeling valued.
- No-one needs to worry about what they’re saying – it’s non-threatening and non-competitive.
- When you meet people with a wide variety of experiences, you’re in a better position to help others – a greater body of knowledge.

Read more: [Personal Health Budget guide - Developing a local peer network \(Department for Health\)](#)

Industry Professional Networks in the motor industry

‘[20 groups](#)’ bring together similar, non-competing dealers from a broad cross-section of the country to exchange best practices, experiences, ideas and strategies. The first peer group of this type was brought together by the owner of several Ford dealerships in the US who thought it would be helpful to create opportunities for managers from his dealerships to share info and exchange ideas with each other.

Years on, the model continues to thrive not only in the car manufacturing and sale industry but also in the advertising, community banking and graphic arts sectors.

The key benefits of this models is that it helps challenge myopia and inertia:

- **Myopia** is the manager tendency to emphasise the significance of local developments and familiar things at the expense of the global, distant and unfamiliar.
- **Inertia** is basically a form of complacency. It consists in clinging to assumptions and time-tested ways of doing things, where companies grow comfortable in their familiar niches accompanied by a sense that things will continue as they are.

These two trends are dangerous in the long term as they prevent realistic strategic planning. Participating in peer networks helps professionals sense wider trends and share tactics for dealing with them in a safe, non-competitive space.

Read the full article: [Improving Capabilities through Industry Peer Networks](#)

Q3: Do the dynamics above sound familiar or similar to your own community business networks? Are there ways you might mirror the above practices in your own networks?

4 How does this happen?

At this point, you may be thinking: “Great! Let’s get to work!”. But before (or while) doing this, it may be helpful to think through some of the key conditions that need to be in place to ensure peer networking is successful and effectively allows best practices and capacity to develop.

As you may have guessed, it is the connection between people that allows best practices to emerge and people’s capacities to develop. These connections can be fostered through:

- **Events**
- **Online platforms** for meetings or more static information sharing and signposting
- **Collaborative projects** e.g. initiated by a common pot of funding

The Department for Health has put together a great [‘To Do’ list for successful peer network meetings](#).

Q4: What are some of the activities you run to encourage capacity building and the development of good practices?

4.1 Peer networking for capacity development: what conditions are needed?

Here are some of the key questions to ask when organising opportunities for peer networking:

- **Trust and respect:** Studies have found that [trust and group reputation](#) play a key role in the way people interact in peer networks. Ensuring that underlying tensions are resolved and that there is a basic level of trust among peers can go a long way in creating a conducive environment for problem-solving.

- **Time:** Collaboration takes time - and crucially, trust is built over time. Peer networking is generally most effective where there is enough time for people to get to know each other in an unstructured way - but not so much time that they may end up getting bored!
- **Equality:** It is crucial that no one's contribution is more important than anyone else's. Facilitation skills and knowledge of group dynamics are a great resource that can help pay more attention to unequal power and help address this.
- **Diversity:** When people of different ages, ethnicities and backgrounds are involved, it is easier to be exposed to the widest varieties of ideas, knowledge and information.
- **Adaptability:** As always the needs of the peer network should dictate what kind of best practice or capacity is developed. Network 'leaders' or 'guardians' can hugely benefit their peer network when they listen to these needs and help shape activities accordingly, even if they are different to what was initially planned.
- **Self-interest:** What are the pain points of your members? What would appeal to them?
- **Celebration:** Celebrating successes and achievements can help move on to the next challenge with more motivation and brings people closer together.

Q4.1: What other conditions need to be in place to ensure people feel comfortable sharing and developing best practices together?

5 Challenges

As you might imagine, it's not all as easy as it may seem. When trying to ensure best practices emerge and people's capacity develops as part of your peer network, you may run into one or more of the following challenges identified by other practitioners. It is not our intention to make this a daunting list! On the contrary, by identifying what can go wrong, we can be better prepared to face the obstacles to productive peer networking and capacity development.

- **Time:** depending on the type of network, members may be asked to participate in their spare time. People are busy, and even more so if they are under financial pressures. This can lead to decreased participation among certain groups.
- **Cost / benefit:** is it worth it? Following on from the previous point: how can peer networking opportunities with the purpose of developing best practice be made as appealing as possible, and worth people's while?
- **Authenticity vs. professional personas:** Often if people join professional peer networks (vs. personal interest peer networks) they may feel they have to perform in a 'professional' manner of withhold certain information. To this end, it can be helpful to establish ground rules, or a code of conduct, early on. For example, in car

manufacturing industry networks, members felt comfortable in sharing financial information with each other, as they knew everyone else would be doing so.

- **Engaging long-standing members:** Long standing members may feel they are getting less out of the network than newer members. A possible solution is to help members find new groups to join, however this feeling is often lessened by the development of friendships within the network.
- **Aging networks and typecasting:** As we know, people take on different roles in peer networks. This can lead to unhelpful dynamics, e.g. if one person takes on the 'questioning' role in the network, people may begin to think they are expressing personal prejudice rather than constructive criticism.
- **Group cohesion around individuals:** the presence of highly influential and well-connected members of a peer network can help create more connections within a group, however when these individuals leave, there is a danger of the group disintegrating.
- **Toxic dynamics or groupthink** may occur when groups converge on a set of practices its members think are 'best' - but this leaves little space for innovation or new solutions. One possible solution is to rotate members to different groups and assign new members to existing groups.
- **Concentration of power and resources** may happen where certain network members have more power than others to shape the network or influence it. An example of this are online platforms like [Airbnb or Uber](#), where the platform owners are seen to have more power than the 'peers' or users. A similar dynamic may appear in membership organisations, where the core or centre of the peer network is seen as different or as having more power than the other members. Equally in neighbourhood community networks, those with the most time and resources may end up dominating.

Q5: Have you come across any of these challenges? How have you dealt with them? Who could you ask for advice in dealing with them?

6 Conclusion

Despite the challenges, peer networking is a great way for people to build capacity and develop best practices. The community business sector will find this extremely beneficial, given its diversity and richness. Through effective peer networking, people with similar goals and/or roles in a community or organisation can come together and learn new skills, improve the way they work and build a support network.

In this briefing, we took an in-depth look at the intricacies of this process. We looked at:

- Introducing value creation and exchange in peer networks

- Definitions of ‘good practice’ and ‘capacity building’
- Benefits of good practice and capacity building through peer networking
- Case studies: practical example of good practice and capacity building in peer networks
- The nitty-gritty: how do we make this happen?
- Challenges and how to address them

We hope this has been helpful and we look forward to exploring this topic with you during our online session!

7 Further resources

- [Proving the value of peer networks](#)
An online slideset providing themed direct quotes and examples of the value peer networks can provide to their members.
- [The Power of Peer-to-Peer Networks](#)
A short article exploring the real, tangible value of peer-to-peer networks at different levels of experience and in different sectors.
- [Peer network case study: NHS connecting people to develop a personal health budget](#)
A rich, hands-on guide produced by the Department of Health, illustrating how the NHS went about encouraging the creation of peer networks to support the roll-out of Personal Health Budgets.
- [Do peer networks like Uber distribute value fairly?](#)
An inquiry into the power dynamics behind online peer networking platforms by the author of *Peers Inc.* What does the imbalance of power look like for platforms like Uber and AirBnB? Who benefits from the peer dynamics that sustain these platforms?
- [Improving Capabilities Through Industry peer networks](#)
An in-depth exploration of the workings of Industry Peer Networks in the car industry and beyond. How can professionals connect to improve their practice and stay abreast of wider sector trends? A surprisingly insightful and valuable analysis.
- BONUS: [Swagger, Ratings and Masculinity: Theorising the circulation of social and cultural value in teenage boys’ digital peer networks](#)
An academic paper looking at how ‘swagger’ and ‘ratings’ function as a value network in teenage boys’ peer networks in the aftermath of the 2011 London riots.

