

## Lessons Learned for Creating Successful Networks

2013 Confluence Participant Recommendations

November 10, 2013

The [Center for Ethical Leadership](#) in Seattle hosted the [2013 Confluence](#) to help foundations, governments, nonprofits, and others weave networks to unlock the potential residing in their communities in order to take on big challenges. One activity invited the participants to share one or more “Lessons Learned for Creating Successful Networks” that had a positive impact. The recommendations in this document reflect the attendees’ overall experience managing or using networks and/or new insights from the event. For example, the importance of cultivating healthy relationships emerged as one of the top themes:

*“It’s all about relationships.*

*It will always take longer than you think, because it takes time to build relationships.”*

A Confluence organizer shared the following insight:

*“My biggest lesson learned is about opening up the design process to a larger group. The design group started out intentionally small so we could be nimble, but we decided early on to open it up to anyone who wanted to play. So many brilliant people responded and took real ownership over the design and the event! When more people are in the core group, it’s a better program, it’s more collaborative, with more people facilitating up front, and of course, more aligned with our core network principles. Walking the talk was key to the success of this Confluence, from beginning to end (and it isn’t over yet!)”*

- Patricia Hughes, Center for Ethical Leadership

The following categories emerged:

- I. The Big Picture
- II. Focus & Shared Purpose
- III. Chaos & Magic
- IV. Relationships
- V. Individuals & Outsiders
- VI. Education
- VII. Questions

The Center would like to extend our gratitude to Pamela Kilborn-Miller for compiling this information.

## I. THE BIG PICTURE

"There's a lot of unlearning to do from all of our familiar facilitation practices. People need to create space for the network to emerge. We need to focus on relationships and ideas and let the connectedness emerge. You can't yank it out."

Dale

"The following framework is drawn from Keith McCandless' Liberating Structures work ([www.liberatingstructures.com](http://www.liberatingstructures.com)). I think the key lesson is that I've found LS to accelerate the development of mature networks by making it possible to include everyone and to begin generating results almost immediately. (Fisher sketched the following elements in a circle...)

- **Purpose** – What is the fundamental justification for this work to the outside world? (Magnet sketch asked how are you going to wildly attract people?)
- **Principles** – What must we do? What must we NOT do? (DNA sketch asked, what are the minimal rules necessary to unleash EVERYONE?)
- **Participants** – Who must be involved? (circle of people sketch)
- **Structure** – How will we self-organize to achieve our purpose? (network model sketches included hub and spoke, hierarchy and Petri Nets) What infrastructure is necessary? (Roles, finance, cadence & frequency of meetings.)
- **Practices** – What are we delivering to customers/users? (hammer sketch)"

Fisher

"It's important to know how much infrastructure is needed to support the network and how to deliver it. This changes over time. Too much infrastructure can kill the network...but so can not enough."

James

"Consider being 'governance lite' especially when forming and prototyping. Remember that organizations usually make rules and criteria from experience: punt, practice, policy and protocol. And that rules are often created to avoid the necessity of courageous conversations with one-time system outliers. Let your core and common sense serve as your network rulebook when you can."

Ted

"To access the power of what is available when working in networks, here are a few thoughts that resonated for me throughout the confluence I would like to share:

- Be intentional about the focus of your network being about relationships and the passion people bring, not on the tasks and positions people may bring to the table. In Nourishing Networks, we try to emphasize that 'relationships are the currency and passion is the fuel that drives successful networks.'"
- The magic of working in networks begins to manifest when people begin to say things like 'here's what I will do to help' as opposed to 'here's what somebody else ought to do.'
- Once you have a handle on your own personal experience of what it's like and what is happening when you are working in a network way, you can use that to reflect on how to move your network forward; because as you trust your own experience, you will be able to let go of the pressure you might feel about needing to know everything there is to know about networks to be successful.
- To the extent you can, continue to be conscious about when you are operating in network mode vs. the dominant centralized-control mode.
- Roles are so important. Ensure you have connectors and guardians actively engaged because those are important ingredients to the growth and sustainability of your network."

Linda

“Networking is often the best way to deal with complex problems. However, many times in order to actually get something done, you need to move to a team/org model. Try to identify and help people know when and how to move from network to team/org, and back again.”

Richard

“If you put a network in a system it will fail. A formal network functions voluntarily and is not bound by the bureaucratic constraints of a people-made system and can identify leverage points and serve as a web, to support a bureaucratic system (or program or department) that cannot be as fluid.

People have to check their egos and organizations' mission statements at the door and ask what do we have in common, what do we understand the problem is, what are the leverage points, what can we not do alone, and what can we do together, how do we build trust? See Re-Amp case study in "An Introduction to Network Weaving" by June Holley for more lessons learned.”

Karen

“A really fluid network I encountered this past spring in Nepal was really creative in discovering ways to build community, hold each other accountable, and be available to support each other when needed in the tension of their surrounding context. I noticed networks that base their work and energy on living out their core values in daily processes often thrive and are catalysts to launch other strong networks of committed people to these underlying core values.”

Jayne

“The following lessons might not be 100% consistent with what we learned at the Confluence but they reflect my experience:

- For credibility, visibility and reach, partner with a highly regarded, neutral convener such as the U.N., TED, city government, a foundation or the Center for Ethical Leadership.
- One lesson from a Gates Foundation collaboration was for partners to agree on the basic questions, such as what is our theory of change?
- Leaders need to model the behavior they want to see in the community and online.
- Successful U.N. networks meet in person at least once a year to strengthen relationships, capture lessons learned, agree on goals for the future and create working groups.
- Regarding network reach, consider when it's important to go 'broad' versus 'deep'? When do you need to connect 'broad' and 'deep?' What are simple steps to do so? Sometimes broad and deep don't need to be connected. For example, 'broad' might mean leveraging social media partnerships to share success stories and 'deep' could offer training sessions with follow-up support. Or, they can work together.
- If you want donors, build measurement and evaluation into the planning process.”

Pamela

“To unleash the power of the network, I recognize the need to let go of old habits of control. I recognize the importance of cultivating safe spaces for deep human connection. I recognize the power of asking questions. And listening. I appreciate the profound changes in culture and awareness that occur when we develop intentional agreements about how we want to live with one another, how we will set things right when situations are out of balance, how we engage around painful issues and conflict. I stand amazed at the power of Restorative Circles to empower individuals and communities to take self-responsibility about issues that matter, develop mutual understanding through face-to-face dialogue, and engage in collective action to create the world we want to live in. I appreciate the resiliency of the human spirit and the capacity of people to operate at their highest and within a network of loving support we call community.”

Andrea

## II. FOCUS & SHARED PURPOSE

“Emerging networks are challenged to identify purpose.”

Viki

“A lot of groups who meet to share info quickly become groups that aren’t useful or meaningful. Networks need to accomplish something. I need to be strategic about where I put my time.”

Joanne

“Revolutionary! One need not create a defined goal but instead one can allow it to emerge through the exploration of shared purpose and clarification of what each person wants to do.”

Jenifer

“Networks are organic. They fluctuate, form, dissolve and shift constantly. This is okay – and necessary because the shared goal/vision is what really matters.”

Todd

“People coming into a network must have a common understanding, first, that they all need and support the idea of seeking help to build the community. Each one should then convey what they need for themselves, and what they hope to achieve through the network. Then we're all ready to start the work.”

Ben

“Sometimes leaders are not fully aware of the power of the network they are a part of. So they do not utilize them in a way that furthers their organizational mission. However, once their eyes are open to the benefits of network thinking, they see the potential and become unstoppable.”

JMarie

### III. CHAOS & MAGIC

“Find the right balance between command & control vs. too ‘loosey goosey.’ The circle process is a step in the right direction. Pull in the outside voices because that’s where the meat is hiding. Ask ‘whose voice is not being heard?’ and invite them into the circle.”

T Anne

“Have patience and faith. Let go of outcomes and process. Appreciate the various things people bring even when you don’t agree. Let the magic happen!”

Karin

“Facilitate the introduction of network stakeholders, nodes, but let self-organization germinate and mature on its own, you cannot force it. Trust in the chaos and look for, expect the opportunities for the network to progress to present themselves. Some people would call this ‘divine intervention.’”

Jameson

“Work can be happening even when it doesn't look that way, so be open to the mess and chaos that is a normal aspect of creating networks.”

Tamara

“Messy is okay.”

Claudia

#### IV. RELATIONSHIPS

“Take time to build relationships. Start with a core group that already has connection, clarity and is willing to let go of what they know/want to make room for others to shape the direction.”

Karma

“It’s all about relationships. It will always take longer than you think because it takes time to build relationships.”

Jennifer

“Enjoy cultural differences. The differences are the seeds of creativity. I gave up quick fix.”

Keiko

“Build trust through plenty of communication. Over-communicate rather than under-communicate, such as copying everyone on emails. When a network is fully informed, it creates an opportunity for someone to step forward.”

Linda

“It’s all about relationships and follow-through.”

Lee

“Take time to build relationships because they are the crux of the power of the network. People who focus on the structure sometimes forget to manage the human aspect, which is the key to making it work.”

Kristin

“Be willing to invest the time in relationship building. Be prepared to let go of control of how you think things should go.”

Deborah

“Focus on relationships. Invite a lot of people to get the right balance. Make sure people understand the concept of a network and find a good facilitator to avoid falling back into traditional or hierarchical practices.”

Cori

“Densely connected networks are more likely to have an impact if there are quality relationships.”

Derrick

“Be patient. A successful network brings people together for a common purpose, and with active engagement over time, both people and purpose expand and grow beyond the initial vision.”

Mark

## V. INDIVIDUALS & OUTSIDERS

“Those with differing views need to be a part of the conversation. If we work only within the circle of those who are like-minded, we'll never be able to truly create large-scale social change.”

Laura

“When someone in your network seems to be pulling back, check in and find out what’s up for them? Do exit interviews when possible with those who leave. They might be seeing a problem that you are in denial about.”

Elizabeth

“The space needs to be safe so people can talk about emotional and personal issues.”

Pradeepta

“I learned that when we open ourselves up to our vulnerabilities, help emerges in many new forms.”

Lisa

“I need to check my ego at the door and get out of the way of the success of the network and it will happen as it should.”

Helen

“Allow for peoples interests to change and evolve as they learn more about what moves them, what the community needs, and what contribution would create a reciprocal ‘thrive’ for both.” (Thrive is the next step from survival.)

Rachel

“Pay attention to introverts or networks will fail. Create quiet for the introvert and for everyone to think. Interrupt talk with quiet moments for personal synthesis. You can’t think when you’re listening to someone else.”

Burr

“Network from the heart. If we are going to engage in conversation then really engage. Don’t just focus on the conversation but on the other person because that’s what makes it worthwhile. Be open and say what’s on your mind.”

Greg

“...Focus on the individual rather than just on their contribution to a functional network.”

Patrick

“Be aware of when someone is being a leader vs. politician. Am I creating space vs. allowing space to emerge vs. putting out only what I think can get done (aka being political)?”

Jim

“Be able to receive and accept help. Be able to say ‘yes’ when someone shows up.”

Paula

“Being in networks means never having to say, ‘I can’t.’” Or, “Being in networks means never having to say, ‘It won’t work.’”

Dori

“Figure out how to build on our strengths.”

Anonymous

“The very things that make us tick in our personal lives, love, trust, respect, community – are actually the foundations for ‘ticking’ professional work. Communities and love and trust are what really set the stage for social change. Who knew?!”

Emily



## VI. EDUCATION

“Networks are not about whether I/you/we do things ‘well’ but about whether we are learning from what we are doing.”

Viki

"There are so many things to learn and so many different ways to learn them"

Melanie

## VII. QUESTIONS

One of the “rules for being human,” is that lessons will be repeated until they are learned. To help maximize the value of lessons learned exercises such as this one and hopefully stop repeating undesirable patterns, please consider the following questions:

1. What is the best way to capture, present, share and operationalize Lessons Learned?
2. What are the common barriers to implementing Lessons Learned? How can they be overcome?
3. Which organizations or networks are setting a great example of capturing and implementing lessons learned in a manner that has a proven impact?
4. How can we track the positive ripple effects of sharing lessons learned across networks?
5. What do you need or want to learn from others about networks and how?

You're welcome to send more questions, answers, comments and/or feedback regarding this document to [Pam Kilborn-Miller](#).

For questions regarding the 2013 Confluence event, contact [Karma Ruder](#) or [Patricia Hughes](#).