

Unique Challenges of Networks

The Oxford Dictionary defines network as both “a group or system of interconnected people or things” and “a group of people who exchange information, contacts, and experience for professional or social purposes”. MADJ Consulting Group frequently writes and speaks about partnering well. This includes ways organizations cooperate or coordinate with each other, and when organizations combine programs or services in various ways. Much of our work focuses on two organizations coming together; however, within the non-profit sector, networks of multiple organizations are very common. Most networks are made up of many organizations, resulting in unique challenges and cautions to pay attention to. Some of the areas that networks may experience challenges are grouped below.

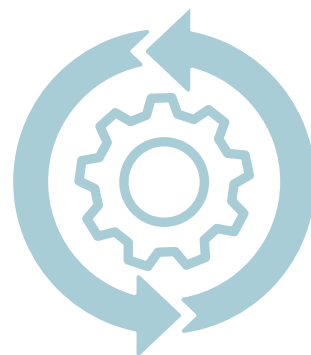


ENGAGEMENT

- Lots of organizations and people are part of the network but only a portion are actively engaged by attending meetings or contributing to activities.
- People come to the meetings but do not share their thoughts and/or do not volunteer to contribute.
- Engagement level is person-specific (i.e., person is very keen and gets involved) but the organization they are representing is not engaged.

CONTINUITY

- Frequent changes in who participates in the network from each organization makes it difficult to make progress.
- Conversations (rules of engagement, decisions) or activities (orientation, team building) are frequently repeated or revisited to accommodate changes in member representation.
- There is not a history of the network's decisions/activities that can be easily shared with new members.
- Rotating leadership or administrative support can distribute time and responsibility commitments, but this approach can contribute to a lack of continuity.



PURPOSE

- Lack of clarity among members on why the network exists. For example, some think the purpose is information sharing and others think it's collective advocacy or something else.
- High network member engagement is limited to people who have the most to gain compared to those who have the most to offer.
- Meeting agendas that do not align with the purpose or agendas that are not followed or derailed by side conversations.
- Lots of conversation but very little action.

ENDING

- People or organizations leaving without the larger network knowing why they have left.
- Member organizations wanting to leave or opt-out so do not attend meetings but leave their name on the members list.
- Lack of evaluation of the network.
- Continuing a network long after it has stopped being valuable to many members.
- Key people maintaining the network for emotional or social reasons.



Implementing proactive actions can go a long way to mitigating many of the challenges above. Here are some strategies to consider:

Review the purpose of the network frequently. We do not mean read it aloud once a year, but make sure everyone is familiar with it and that the time spent on network activities aligns with the purpose. Consider adding it to the top of each communication/ email or into each meeting agenda.

Align your time and activities with your purpose. If your purpose is information sharing – then share information and do not expect people to get involved in advocacy or a joint network project. Check that any agenda or plan for your time together also aligns with your purpose. For example, if the purpose is networking and information sharing, the majority of your time together might be in small groups to support members getting to know each other and their organizations.

Put expectations of members in writing and keep it simple. If you expect members to attend all meetings, say that. If members are expected to contribute a certain amount of time on specific activities, say that. If one of your values is that sometimes members will be gaining from the network and other times they will be contributing, say that. It's recommended that this be a simple and plain language document, no need for general language that sounds lovely but can lead to differences in interpretation.

Put time limits on commitment. Provide a natural time for members to review their commitment to the network and provide the option to leave or take a break as needed. Intentionally creating a framework for renewing individual or organizational membership can help ensure those who are involved remain engaged.

