

Going Deeper:

Supporting a Network





Developing and Supporting a Network

People are, at heart, social beings. It’s no surprise, then, that finding ways to build, strengthen, and use connections across individuals and organizations—or creating and building networks—to do everything from creating alignment, changing behavior, or promoting greater coordination and shared purpose can be a core approach for seeking large-scale social change.

Sometimes, network development and support efforts can be conflated with social movements, something we describe more fully in the brief “Not Always Movements: Multiple Approaches to Advance Large-Scale Social Change.” However, building and supporting networks as an approach has a unique set of characteristics and distinct theory of change. If you are implementing this approach, it is worth doing well.

+ In this companion piece to the fuller brief, we seek to help foundation staff, social change leaders, and others involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating these efforts to gain more clarity and understanding about what they are doing and the kind of changes they can reasonably expect in the near and long term; how

their work can more consistently reflect principles of equity and apply them to advance equitable outcomes; and how to track and learn more about change. Specifically, in this piece you’ll find the following:

A description of network building and development and key assumptions

- + Some theories and frameworks that might be helpful
- + Questions to help bake principles of equity into the work
- + Key outcomes to look for
- + Insights related to tracking progress and learning along the way
- + A list of resources to learn more

Our hope is that this resource can provide a bite-sized overview and introduction to key concepts that could support more effective development and implementation of this approach, which will lead to equitable impact.

In “[Not Always Movements: Multiple Approaches to Advance Large-Scale Social Change](#),” we provide overviews and compare and contrast three large-scale social change approaches that we think have similarities with social movements:



Field Building



Network Development



Promoting Uptake of Practices by large numbers of organizations

We chose to focus on these approaches because we see them commonly conflated with movements. In the piece, we further detail these approaches—that is, their definitions, key theory of change, primary characteristics, outcomes, and other components, with the aim of helping foundation staff as well as social change leaders and others involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating social change strategies to better situate their work within these approaches where applicable. If you are unsure if you are building a field or if you want to learn more, [check out the full brief](#).



Network Development

What is it?

NETWORK DEVELOPMENT: Connecting a group of individuals or organizations, through meaningful relationships and with space for self organization, to work together across a particular issue.

A **network** is group of individuals or organizations connected through meaningful relationships that have space for self organization and that leverage new technologies for visualization, connection, and collective action.”¹ To advance social change, networks “provide the mechanism for like-minded groups and individuals to work together across a particular issue or constituency.”² **Network development and building** seeks to have networks perform a range of important functions that are critical to systemic change efforts: strengthening and expanding social ties, enhancing access to new and diverse perspectives, facilitating knowledge and information sharing, coordinating resources and action, and providing an underlying infrastructure for building widespread awareness and engagement.³

Networks that seek to address broad, complex issues often require at least some degree of formal coordination, structures, and processes to make sure that they work as efficiently and effectively as possible,⁴ so network building is typically conceptualized as a proactive approach

aimed at creating those conditions. Some elements of network building include:

- + Connecting individuals and organizations
- + Establishing shared agendas and activities
- + Managing relationships/information
- + Harnessing/building capacity of those in the network
- + Building infrastructure

While these activities can create the conditions and infrastructure necessary to support a network, they are done in service of creating a self-organizing, self-sustaining entity with high levels of participation and leadership from its members, one that derives its power from “peer coordination and the agency of the crowd.”⁵

A **key assumption** underlying networks as an approach to advancing social change is that the collective impact of an interconnected group that is “bound” by a common concern, interest, or goal will successfully advance broad and durable social impact.

The Partnership for the Future of Learning

In 2012, a group of education funders began to think about how a different set of guiding values might lead to a different set of educational policies that would help grow and support “New Models” of learning. This group wanted to have funders show up in different education spaces and honor different contexts and communities while being real about the ways the system needs to update and change, including the articulation of new narratives around public education and building power and connection in order to overcome the siloed nature of the many different efforts going on in the education space. From these initial conversations, a long-term strategy emerged. The Partnership for the Future of Learning was based around the development of a diverse network of educators, thought leaders, advocates, and funders that would fundamentally change how these individuals and groups relate to and strategize with one another to advance shared goals. The changes the Partnership envisions are substantial but feasible and cannot be accomplished by any single entity, funder, or organization. Coalescing around a vision to reimagine the way public education is viewed in the United States and to promote its delivery to more equitable and high-quality standards, the network supports collective action across over 100 organizations and 18 foundations, engaged in the promotion of policies to strengthen the education system, changing the narrative around public education, and identifying and disseminating the shared principles and capacities needed to better remodel the system at local and state levels.

What are some key concepts and frameworks that might be useful?

Networks can serve a variety of functions; therefore, clarity about the purpose of a network—that is, desired end goals—is vital to guiding its development and understanding its progress. In a piece on networks for

philanthropy for the Barr Foundation, Peter Plastrik and Madeleine Taylor articulate many common functions of networks (bearing in mind that networks often reflect more than one of these):

Table 1 – Common Purposes of Networks⁶

Purpose	Description
Innovation	Network’s purpose is to generate novelty (new knowledge, products).
Diffusion	Network’s purpose is to promote rapid spread of ideas, products.
Combination	Network’s purpose is to assemble new capacities.
Alignment	Network’s purpose is to form or promote coalescence around a new identity/brand.
Mobilization	Network’s purpose is to reach and activate many people.
Exchange	Network’s purpose is to share information widely.
Assessment	Network’s purpose is to provide diverse feedback or evaluation.
Advocacy	Network’s purpose is to influence existing decision-making structures.
Delivery	Network’s purpose is to develop or channel resources and assistance to increase capacity.

Source: Plastrik, P., & Taylor, M. (2003). Network Power for Philanthropy and Nonprofits.

Having articulated goals for the network, those pursuing network strategies may also find it helpful to think about the types of connections that it will be important to foster and where investments and energy might be focused. In their work on achieving social influence at scale, Noshir

Contractor and Leslie DeChurch identify the types of “centrality” that different individuals might have in a network, which can be helpful in understanding the kinds of people it will be important to bring into networks and the roles they might be well-positioned to play within them.

Table 2 – Types of Centrality in Networks⁷

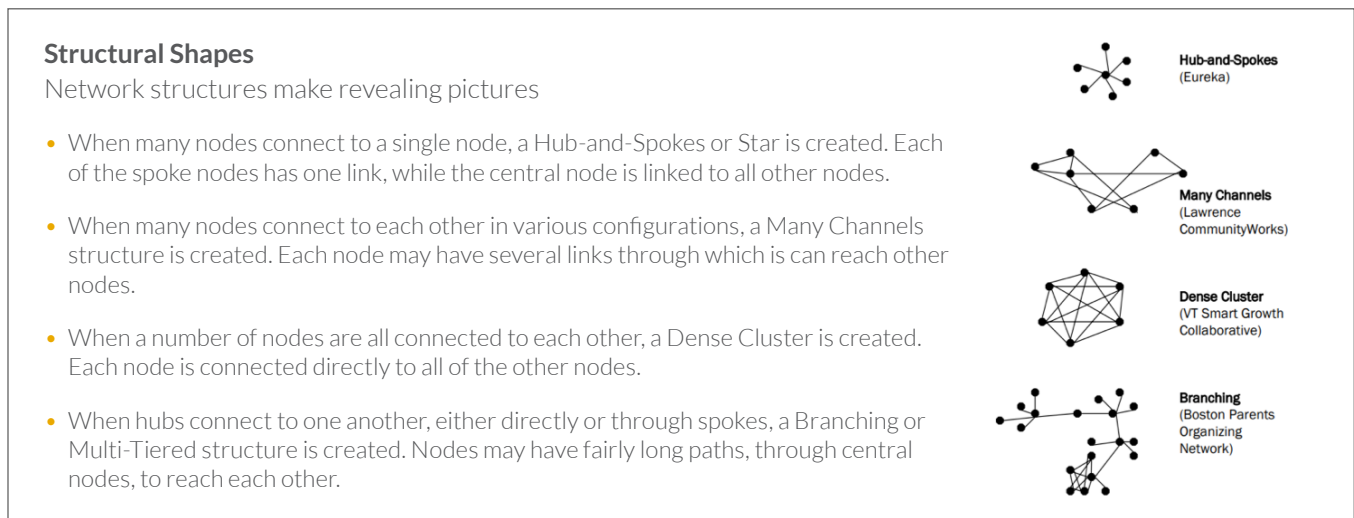
Type of Centrality	Description	Implications
Degree centrality	People with more direct connections than any other individual	These individuals are connectors: they know many others and are therefore in a position to share knowledge with and influence (as well as be influence by) many others
Betweenness centrality	Intermediaries on the shortest path between the most pairs of otherwise unconnected people	These individuals are brokers: They connect people who do not have direct contact to one another. They are well-positioned to gather and combine knowledge, ideas, and so forth, from members of the network who are not able to share directly. They can be efficient influencers, knowing that the individuals they are in contact with will not have direct contact with each other.
Closeness centrality	People with the shortest direct or indirect paths to all other members in the network	These individuals serve as pulse-takers in the network: they are particularly well qualified to take the “pulse” of the network in terms of collective understandings and opinion and are also well positioned to disseminate these.
Prestige centrality	People who feel central in the network because they are connected to other central people in the network	Individuals who have high prestige are the most influential in the network, not by virtue of being connected to many others but instead by being connected to those who are influential and can therefore cascade change.

Source: Contractor, N. S., & DeChurch, L. A. (2014). Integrating Social Networks and Human Social Motives to Achieve Social Influence at Scale.

Networks can also have many different structures and “shapes,”—for example, patterns of connection. While no means exhaustive, Figure 1 provides examples of network structure. The most relevant or optimal structural shapes are dependent on a network’s objectives. For example, a “hub-and-spokes” model could be useful for quickly

diffusing information or channeling resources, while a “branching” model could be useful for mobilization and activation. A “many channels” model could be helpful when networks seek to influence multiple decision makers or decision-making bodies.

Figure 1 – Examples of Networks’ Structural Shapes⁸



Source: Plastrik, P., & Taylor, M. (2003). Network Power for Philanthropy and Nonprofits.

How can this approach advance equity?

Network approaches can be aimed at outcomes that address disparities and inequities and achieve greater equity. Networks can also be grounded in equitable principles from the outset, making these fundamental to the approach. To assure a network is grounded in equitable principles, including diversity of participants, respectful exchange, and distributed power, the following questions are important to consider (though are not exhaustive):

- + Who is engaged in defining the purpose of the network and setting shared goals?
- + What is the composition of the network? Who is included? Who decides who is included?

- + Do certain stakeholders need additional supports/capacities to fully participate in the network?
- + Who is occupying positions of leadership within the network?
- + Who receives training and other forms of professional development?
- + How does where funding is directed in a network promote equity or maintain inequitable systems?
- + Do materials and resources shared with and by the network explicitly address issues of race and equity? Are they accessible to a wide range of stakeholders?

Network development could be implemented as a singular approach or in combination with other approaches or strategies aimed at social impact. To learn more about how social change efforts may overlap or be mutually reinforcing, [Check out the full brief.](#)

What are key outcomes to look for?

The most near-term changes resulting from network effort are likely to occur among network actors: changes in their capacity, relationships, and practices. What follows may be changes in

characteristics of the network itself as well as the outcomes the network seeks. The table below identifies outcomes that may be relevant to networks at different stages of the work.

Table 3 – Example Outcomes of Network Strategies

Shorter-Term	Longer-Term
Changes in network actors' capacity and ability to usefully participate in the network's purpose (includes individuals, groups, or organizations)	Changes that reflect advancement of a network's intent and purpose
Increased capacity to engage in network functions	
Increased capacity to advance network goals	Greater innovation or greater capacity within a particular system or sphere of work
Increased access to information, knowledge, and resources	
Changes in network characteristics: identity, operations, form, or ability to adapt	Evidence of a new "brand" or way of describing a particular practice or a group
Members demonstrate increased shared identity/purpose/goals	
Increased connectivity between members	Increased effectiveness of a network in advancing ultimate aims
Size and structure of network increasingly matches and is driving network purpose/goals	
Network structure supports increased/optimized transfer of information, knowledge, and resources within the network	
Increased participation/leadership by those most affected by the network's issue	
Network structure allows for useful/necessary adaptation	

Tracking Progress and Learning Along the Way

Measuring the state and progress of network-building efforts has some considerations specific to this type of effort. We wanted to share a few insights we have gained in the past that may help others more effectively and efficiently undertake this work and build upon current practices.⁹

Create clear hypotheses. As noted in Figure 1 preceding, networks can embody different patterns of connection, each of which might be best suited to different aims. Measurement that supports learning and adaptation rests heavily on the extent to which the aims of the network are clear and there are solid assumptions about how a network’s size and structure relate to its aims. In other words, why are the connections between individuals, groups, or organizations important? What will be different because connections exist? We’ve observed that measurement of network strategies commonly focuses on network size and structure, describing the number, types, or patterns of connection. While description of a network can be useful, it offers

an incomplete picture if it cannot test more specific assumptions about how and why a certain network structure is needed. For example, does a strategy presume that a great number of two-way connections are important? Alternately, would a broader set of loose ties represent success in another case? Clear assumptions about optimal network size and structure allow you to assess whether the network’s development is on track to become what’s optimal, and this size and structure does or does not drive desired changes. This combination of data provides a stronger basis upon which to make decisions and determine actions about your network strategy.

Go beyond connectivity. While understanding the degree to which hypothesized connections exist is helpful, understanding a network as an approach is incomplete without also understanding the degree to which the network is healthy and productive (i.e., achieving its aims). This needs to be understood in tandem with connectivity.¹⁰

1. Connectivity	2. Health	3. Results
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Membership or the people or organizations that participate in a network • Structure or how connections between members are structured and what flows through those connections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources or the material resources a network needs to sustain itself (e.g., external funding) • Infrastructure or the internal systems and structures that support the network (e.g., communication, rules and processes) • Advantage or the network’s capacity for joint value creation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interim outcomes or the results achieved as the network works toward its ultimate goal or intended impact • The goal or intended impact itself (e.g., a policy outcome was achieved, a particular practice was spread, the community or its residents changed in a certain way)

Source: Taylor, M., Whatley, A., & Coffman, J. (2015). *Network Evaluation in Practice: Approaches and Applications*.

When organizations are your “nodes.” Often we work with people who want to create more connected ecosystems, or networks, across organizations. When measuring connectedness across organizations, it’s important to consider a few things in collecting social network data:

- + How will you determine connectivity between organizations? Will one person answer on behalf of the organization, or will you designate one role (e.g., executive director) to “speak” for the organization?

- + If you ask more than one organizational representative to answer the survey, how will you rationalize different responses? You could go with the highest or lowest level, for example. We would caution against an average.
- + If you are looking at organizational linkages, you can still consider different demographic characteristics, such as organizational size and makeup (e.g., majority people of color staff or board), but you will have some limitations around exploring differences in connectivity among different groups. Consider what other

characteristics you might want to explore to understand where connections could be further fostered.

- + Consider how to handle issues of confidentiality. Those supporting a network may want to understand who is most and least connected from a strategy point of view. However, organizations within an ecosystem might be concerned about how that data could be viewed by funders or other parties with power. As always, it is important to balance the desires for identifiable data with potential threats to responsiveness and candor.

Where can I learn more and go deeper?

This short brief can only give the smallest taste of the wealth of information that exists that should inform strategy and measurement decisions. Below we provide links to some of the materials we referenced and

found most helpful so that you can dig deeper into the frameworks and ideas that will best support your own thinking and processes.

- Contractor, N. S., & DeChurch, L. A. (2014). [Integrating Social Networks and Human Social Motives to Achieve Social Influence at Scale.](#)
- Holley, J. (2011). [The Network Weaving Handbook](#)
- Plastrik, P., & Taylor, M. (2003). [Network Power for Philanthropy and Nonprofits.](#)
- Scarce, D. (2011). [Catalyzing Networks for Social Change: A Funder's Guide.](#)
- Taylor, M., Whatley, A., & Coffman, J. (2015). [Network Evaluation in Practice: Approaches and Applications.](#)

Endnotes

- ¹ ORS Impact. (2010). *Evaluation of networks.* https://www.orsimpact.com/DirectoryAttachments/132018_35832_578_Evaluation-of-Networks-FINAL-11-2-15.pdf
- ² Masters, B., & Osborn, T. (2010). Social movements and philanthropy: How foundations can support movement building. *The Foundation Review* 2, 3.
- ³ Scarce, D. (2011). *Catalyzing networks for social change: A funder's guide.* Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. https://jimjosephfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Catalyzing_Networks_for_Social_Change.pdf
- ⁴ Mollenhauer, L., Johnston, V., & Gates, J. (2011). *Building a nonprofit network.* <https://ignitenps.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/OVCN-Building-a-Nonprofit-Network-Nov-2011-FINAL-R-1.pdf>
- ⁵ Heimans, J., & Timms, H. (2014). Understanding "new power." *Harvard Business Review*, 92(12), 48–56.
- ⁶ Plastrik, P., & Taylor, M. (2003). *Network power for philanthropy and nonprofits.* Boston, MA: The Barr Foundation. <http://www.p-sj.org/files/Network%20Power%20for%20Philanthropy%20and%20Nonprofits.pdf>
- ⁷ Contractor, N. S., & DeChurch, L. A. (2014). Integrating social networks and human social motives to achieve social influence at scale. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111(Supplement 4), 13650–13657.
- ⁸ Plastrik, P., & Taylor, M. (2003). *Network power for philanthropy and nonprofits.* Boston, MA: The Barr Foundation. <http://www.p-sj.org/files/Network%20Power%20for%20Philanthropy%20and%20Nonprofits.pdf>
- ⁹ Check out the brief, [Not Always Movements: Multiple Approaches to Advance Large-Scale Social Change](#) for considerations about how to effectively track progress and learn along the way when you are implementing social change approaches in dynamic environments more broadly.
- ¹⁰ Taylor, M., Whatley, A., & Coffman, J. (2015). Network evaluation in practice: Approaches and applications. *The Foundation Review*, 7(2), 5.