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Assessing Nonprofit Networks Prior to Funding: Tools for Foundations to Determine Life Cycle Phase and Function

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Introduction

Social networks are individuals, groups, or organizations working together to advance shared interests in ways that can create greater impacts than when working independently. Christakis (2010) believes that “social networks are required for the spread of good and valuable things, like love and kindness and happiness and altruism and ideas. In fact, if we realized how valuable social networks are, we’d spend a lot more time nourishing them and sustaining them, because social networks are fundamentally related to goodness.”

Early in the 20th century, Georg Simmel theorized that:

a collection of human beings does not become a society because each of them has an objectively determined or subjectively impelling life content. It becomes a society only when the vitality of these contents attains the form of reciprocal influence; only when one individual has an effect ... upon another... (Levine, 1971, pp. 4-25).

In this regard, early social-network theorists focused on the identification and quantification of network connections (Moreno & Jennings, 1934). In the late 1940s, researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology began studying the effects of different communication network structures on the ability of groups to solve problems (Bavelas, 1950). Mathematicians, economists, political scientists, anthropologists,

Key Points

- Foundations and other funders can use life cycle analysis tools to determine a nonprofit network’s stage of development and functional characteristics as a precursor to funding network activities. Characteristics that determine a network’s readiness for funding include network cohesion (trust and communication), cooperation (mutual purpose and goals), and capacity for externally focused action.
- Network Mindset Survey analysis can help determine a network’s readiness for funding by measuring members’ understanding of the power and utility of networks; degree of membership engagement; identification of specific, common concerns; and readiness for productive action.
- Three networks that received foundation support for networking principles, mapping, and mindset were analyzed using the Network Mindset Survey tool and were found to be at different functional phases. Analyses assisted in providing next-steps recommendations that were appropriate to the life cycle phase of each network.
- Network Sustainability Survey analysis helped to determine the ability of trained “network weavers” to advance network interests and foster members’ efforts. Network weaver responses to the Network Sustainability Survey tool helped to provide recommendations for increased network development and sustainability.
- The inquiries and analyses generated by this study provide insights for foundations and other funders that are interested in establishing, supporting, and expanding community improvements through the synergy of networks.

sociologists, and researchers of related sciences subsequently developed network definitions and theories through the middle of the 21st century, notably Nadel (1957) for relationship-network theory; Bott (1957) for theories regarding relationships and roles; Pool and Kochen (1978) and Milgram (1967) for theories of association and degrees of separation; Lorrain and White (1971) for social-network modeling; Granovetter (1973) for theorizing the strength of weak network ties; and Freeman (1977) for concepts of actor centrality based on “betweenness.”

This study attempts to learn how new networks can be analyzed to determine their readiness to work in a synergistic manner – a first step in learning when and how networks can be funded.

The study of multi-stakeholder engagement, collaboration, and organizational development are now well-established disciplines that inform our understanding of network practice and potential (Krebs & Holley, 2002; Lagase, 2005; Wei-Skillern & Marciano, 2008). Different now, according to Scarce, Kasper, and Grant and other leading social researchers, is

a wave of new technologies – from conference calls and emails to blogs, wikis, tags, texts, and tweets . . . These tools make it possible to link with any number of people (irrespective of geographic distance), to access a greater diversity of perspectives, to accelerate the sharing of information, and to drastically reduce the costs of participation and coordination (2010, p. 32).

Relatively new research addresses network structural and functional abilities to achieve social action (White, 1992). Portes discussed the symbiotic value of social capital in his statement:

To possess social capital, a person must be related to others, not himself, who are the actual source of his or her advantage. By being thrown together in a common situation, workers learn to identify with each other and support each other’s initiatives (1998, p. 7).

Borgatti, Mehra, Brass, and Labianca further summarized that as a field of study, social networking addresses how autonomous individuals can combine to create enduring, functioning societies. The premise of binding as a mechanism of social relationships explains that social ties can bind individuals together “in such a way as to construct a new entity whose properties can be different from those of its constituent elements” (2009, p.894). Social cohesion, according to Reagans and McEvily (2003), co-occurs with the strength of network ties as a necessary element for transmitting information and thus one of many precursors for collaboration. While Borgatti et al. liken these principles to the benefits of workers’ unions and political alliances, the principle easily corresponds to public benefit agencies and organizations that can synergize their efforts and influence to advance mutually beneficial public policies.

This study attempts to learn how new networks can be analyzed to determine their readiness to work in a synergistic manner – a first step in learning when and how networks can be funded. Leading nonprofit funders such as the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, and many others have recently studied networked organizations to learn if they can achieve social change more efficiently, compared to organizations that work individually. El Ansari and Weiss (2006) stated the need for continued improvement in refining and improving the robustness of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies used in conducting community partnership research, with the first step being the development of better measurement tools.

Network survey tools developed for this study were created to help inform community foundations of the viability of nonprofit networks to achieve positive community change that would

perhaps not be possible through the independent work of nonprofit agencies.

The life cycle analysis survey instrument that was developed for this study attempts to determine the stage of development and functional characteristics of newly networked nonprofit organizations as a precursor to funding network activities. The survey tool specifically attempts to analyze a network's development based on three characteristics: degree of network cohesion (trust and communication), cooperation (mutual purpose and goals), and capacity for externally focused action. Should nodes within networked nonprofits demonstrate strength in these characteristics, foundations and other funders may be a bit more confident in funding networks, assuming that network governance, accountability, fiduciary responsibility, and other cooperative challenges are addressed.

Background

The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, in partnership with the Monitor Institute, began in early 2007 to explore ways for greater philanthropic effectiveness through networking. Networks, it was thought, could provide greater transparency, share information and ideas with greater immediacy, and create opportunities for leadership to emerge in new places (David and Lucile Packard Foundation, n.d.). One of a handful of initial Philanthropy and Networks Exploration projects was a partnership with the Community Foundation for Monterey County (CFMC) to map individuals, organizations, and agencies addressing youth development in Salinas, Calif.

CFMC eventually mapped three nonprofit networks (Adult Literacy, Greenfield Community, and Environment). It created the Social Network Support Project (SNSP) to foster network awareness, introduce a "network mindset" approach to social change, build network capacity through "network weaver" trainings, and provide a forum for network members to imagine greater possibilities for "producing change far beyond the success of any single grant, grantee, or donor" (Fulton, Kasper, & Kibbe, 2010, p. 9). "Network weavers" are people in a network who intentionally commit

time and imagination to looking for new ways to connect others into and within the network (Ricchiuto, 2010).

Evaluation Objectives and Four-Step Approach

The CFMC hired the Monterey County Health Department to evaluate the effectiveness of its Social Network Support Project and assess how the project might transform CFMC's grantmaking and program development. These objectives were explored by first elaborating on a theory of change (Shing, 2010) to include community and CFMC outcomes. Second, four network life cycle functions and phases were identified:

1. sharing (formation phase),
2. learning (focus and growth phase),
3. action (productivity and sustainability phase), and
4. decline/renewal.

Network weaver and member roles were associated with and defined for each of these phases.

Third, a survey instrument was created to determine if the networks were working with an internal (self-benefit) or an external (community-benefit) focus. Network members were asked about their perceived value of networking, understanding of their networks' goals, and their degree and type of network engagement; the results were used to measure the networks' cohesion, trust, and readiness for action. Survey responses were aggregated to identify each network's life cycle phase, thereby informing next-step recommendations for further network development. Fourth, members who received 15 hours of network-weaver training were surveyed to determine their individual assets and challenges, potential for network sustainability, and opinions of the next steps needed for network development.

The inquiries and analyses generated by this study provide insights for foundations and other funders that are interested in establishing, sup-

FIGURE 1 Nonprofit Network Theory of Change Benefiting Communities and Foundations

SNSP Theory of Change Statement: Nonprofit organizations have the potential to increase their effectiveness and have greater impact in the community by actively engaging in a network; foundations can support network awareness and the cultivation of a network mindset among nonprofits.

Problem	Objectives	Focus population	Intervention	Goals	Community outcomes
<p>Many agencies and organizations work in autonomous silos that do not produce results that are as effective as possible.</p> <p>Service providers could increase their effectiveness through peer-based relationships, additional partnerships, and working with others to address shared concerns.</p> <p>Foundations must identify funding mechanisms to more effectively improve the quality of life in the communities they serve.</p>	<p>More service providers increase their capacities for sharing, learning, creation, and innovation.</p> <p>More service providers are networked, creating greater capacity for enhanced service provision, increased funding streams, and greater overall effectiveness.</p> <p>Foundations provide strategies and activities to develop and sustain service provider networks.</p>	<p>Service provider agencies, organizations, and institutions</p> <p>Community leaders who are interested in promoting and sustaining networks</p> <p>Foundations and other interested philanthropic funders.</p>	<p>Survey service providers and community leaders for network connectivity.</p> <p>Map networks; provide results to network members; discuss links and potential connections.</p> <p>Provide network communication conduits and other developmental supports.</p> <p>Identify potential Network weavers; provide a weaver-training course and ongoing supports.</p>	<p>Service providers increase their capacity to effectively produce desired results by sharing information and leveraging resources through communication networks that foster productive relationships and partnerships that address shared concerns.</p> <p>Network weavers provide ongoing communication and organization to stimulate and sustain network activities.</p> <p>Foundations learn what works in developing and sustaining service provider networks.</p>	<p>Complex social and environmental challenges are more efficiently and sustainably addressed by networks of diverse service providers that share strategies and resources.</p> <div style="background-color: #8bc34a; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center; font-weight: bold;">Foundation outcomes</div> <p>Foundations have increased knowledge of fostering and sustaining social network functions throughout life cycle phases. Lessons learned are shared with philanthropic organizations and communities of practice.</p>

porting, and expanding community improvements through the synergy of networks.

Evaluation Tools

Theory of Change

Evaluators use a graphic display called a “theory of change” (Figure 1) to clarify approaches and assumptions for making complex societal changes. The problem, objectives, focus population, and goals help in generalizing outcomes that are expected to occur as the result of an intervention (Connell, Kubisch, Schorr, & Weiss, 1995). The SNSP theory of change describes outcomes that benefit community nonprofit efficiencies through the use of networked capacities and resources and foundation knowledge of how social networking might transform grantmaking and program development.

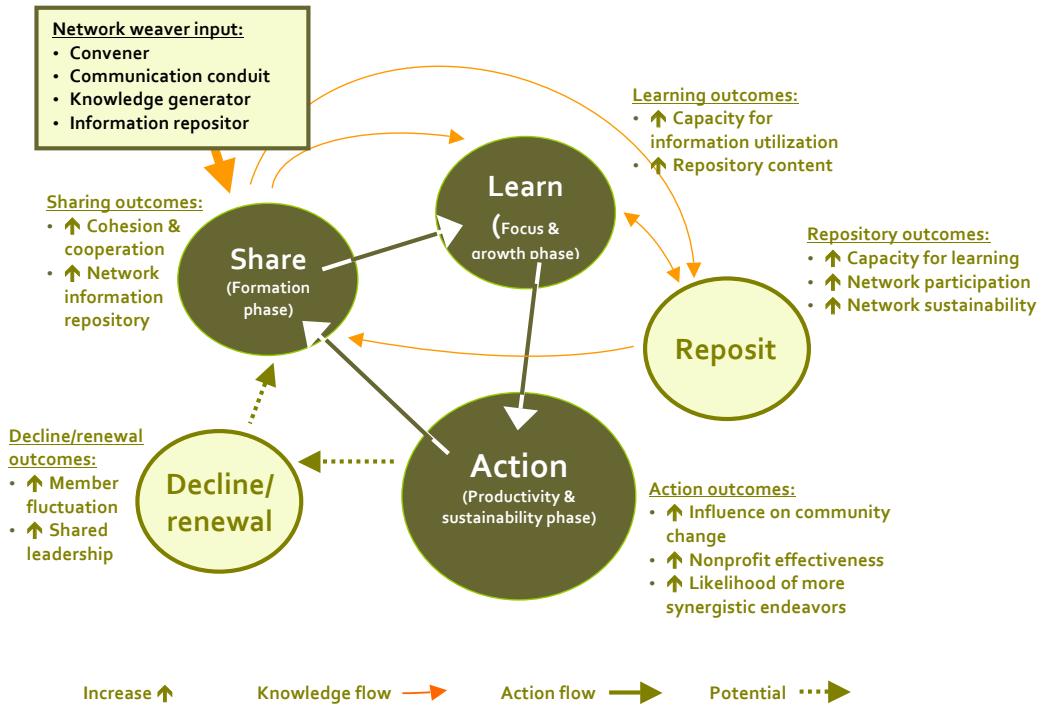
Life Cycle Analysis Tools: Operational Functions and Phases

Networks structures have been described in an array of ways that illustrate their numerous opera-

tional functions. For example, a simple network may have a single hub-and-spoke structure (Krebs & Holley, 2010) in which members connect with a central coordinator but not each other. More complex networks have been described as having a core/periphery architecture that has multiple coordinators to facilitate a flow of sharing, knowledge, and capacity-building functions between higher concentrations of network members (Krebs & Holley, 2010).

In the interest of working networks, CFMC initially assumed the role of convener, knowledge communication conduit, and manager of the information repository with the goal of training network weavers to foster network sustainability. Networks have been shown to benefit from having a central coordinator among a variety of other network roles (Garton, Haythornthwaite, & Wellman, 1999). CFMC’s long-term strategy was to train promising network members to become network weavers who would be responsible for building interactions between and among people,

FIGURE 2 Network Operational Functions



groups, and entities. This plan allowed CFMC to continue guiding a smaller group of network weavers in building further network stability through additional connections, addressing membership attrition, calling attention to network functions, and encouraging network action.

Life Cycle Analysis Tools: Network Weaver and Member Roles

As networks evolve, so do the roles of network weavers and members. Borrowing some elements from network researchers in the international development and public health fields (Crech & Ramji, 2010; Young, Borland, & Coghill, 2010), a network life cycle system was modeled to describe four phases (Figure 2):

1. *Sharing (formation phase)*, during which network weavers work to convene and inspire members, teach benefits and power of network efforts, analyze network connections, provide communication methods and means – in general, act as leaders, educators, and strategists to effectively support the network. During the formation

phase, network members share information with, learn from, and establish relationships with each other, but work independently with little collaboration. They may seek ways to collaborate while continuing to protect their independent interests. They may gain productivity as a result of the information repository, but not necessarily through joint activities.

2. *Learning (focus and growth phase)*, during which network weavers flex between leader and facilitator roles as network members begin to explore issues, voice their preferences, work through decision-making processes, and develop a strategic plan against which network activities and accomplishments can be measured. During this phase, network members plan and work collaboratively with joint purpose and goals. Network activity – such as knowledge contributions and communications – and productive relationships become apparent.

3. *Action (productivity and sustainability phase)*, during which network weavers foster a collective leadership (Kunkel, 2005) that assumes coordination of network sharing, learning, repositing, and use functions. Network weavers keep a focus on productivity, assure activities are relevant, and guard against stagnation. Relationships mature as network members become group oriented; network productivity increases as network members jointly reach outside of their individual agendas. Network activities and accomplishments should be measurable and readily acknowledgeable, as successes fuel future endeavors.

Success at the group level can provide a catalyst, in the form of accomplishment, mutual satisfaction and leadership, for the pursuit of new group endeavors. The network weaver role was to provide an initial spark to instigate network movement, encourage network member participation, and train network weavers to keep the network active.

4. *Decline/renewal*, during which the role of network weavers may be filled jointly or by a succession of leaders who reflect the changing composition of the network membership. However, the weavers' consistent role is to encourage working together to advance shared interests, lead efforts to update a strategic plan, and reinforce value-added ways that networks can create greater impacts than organizations working independently. Membership attrition, fluctuation, and additions will change network member dynamics. Some relationships will become long-term, combinations and re-combinations of members will form to address specific issues, influences and impacts will

become apparent, and the value of the network will regenerate.

Network functions relate to membership activities. The three networks examined in the SNSP study were created for different purposes, had existed for different lengths of time, and were found to be at different phases in their life cycle development. Shifts from one phase to another are thought to take time while network trust and cohesion are built. Importantly, it appeared that network members needed to reach beyond their individual interests (internal focus) so they may successfully pursue group interests (external focus). Success at the group level can provide a catalyst, in the form of accomplishment, mutual satisfaction and leadership, for the pursuit of new group endeavors. The network weaver role was to provide an initial spark to instigate network movement, encourage network member participation, and train network weavers to keep the network active. As members focus their interests, achieve group success, and perhaps split off from the original network, the network weavers may need to recharge the network by reminding members of the possibilities of synergy.

Network Mindset Survey Tool

The Network Mindset Survey Tool (Figure 3) was created specifically for this case study to test the effectiveness of introducing a network mindset to diverse audiences by asking network members about their network utilization, relevance, and benefits. As a literature review of social-network development did not produce examples of survey instruments that queried an individual's awareness or growth in network mindset, the Network Mindset Survey questions were newly developed to categorize the types of network contributions that actors were making in terms of network function, and the quality (self-interested or network-interested) of the contributions. The survey instrument was developed by an experienced social and public health survey researcher and was assessed for content and face validity by a community foundation program officer and a senior health epidemiologist; revisions were made based on received comments.

FIGURE 3 Network Mindset Survey Tool (asked of network members) and Responses

1. What do you want to do as a member of this group? (Select all that apply.)

Answer options	Function	Focus	Literacy		Greenfield		Environment	
			n	%	n	%	n	%
Improve my organization's practices	Action	Internal	12	60%	10	46%	6	75%
Learn how other organizations operate	Learn	Internal	11	55%	11	50%	5	63%
Share resources/funding/expenses with others	Share	Internal	18	90%	13	59%	5	63%
Ask a question about a specific topic	Learn	-	5	25%	1	5%	1	13%
Influence or improve a specific service, system, or policy	Action	External	12	60%	9	41%	4	50%
Learn how to reach influential people	Learn	External	10	50%	3	14%	2	25%
Other (please specify)	-	-	0	0%	6	27%	2	25%

Total respondents and response rates: Literacy 20, 74%; Greenfield 22, 79%; Environment 8, 73%

2. What do you want to contribute to this group? (Select all that apply.)

Answer options	Function	Focus	Literacy		Greenfield		Environment	
			n	%	n	%	n	%
My knowledge, expertise, or program materials that I use	Share	Internal	13	65%	15	68%	6	75%
My experiences in program-service delivery	Share	Internal	12	60%	15	68%	3	38%
My experiences in program administration or funding	Share	Internal	7	35%	5	23%	3	38%
Teach others about my organization	Share	Internal	10	50%	11	50%	7	88%
My ideas of how group members can collaborate better	Share	External	11	55%	9	41%	3	38%
My ideas of issues or concerns the group can address	Action	External	11	55%	11	50%	3	38%
Other (please specify)	-	-	1	5%	2	9%	0	0%

Total respondents and response rates: Literacy 20, 74%; Greenfield 22, 79%; Environment 8, 73%

3. Who do you want to influence through this group? (Select all that apply.)

Answer options	Function	Focus	Literacy		Greenfield		Environment	
			n	%	n	%	n	%
Other group members	Action	Internal	9	45%	45%	68%	6	75%
Others outside of this group	Action	External	10	50%	50%	68%	3	38%
Policymakers, decision makers, managers, elected officials	Action	External	19	95%	95%	23%	3	38%
Funders	Action	External	19	95%	95%	50%	7	88%

FIGURE 3 (continued)

My organization's consumers/potential consumers	Action	Internal	12	60%	18	82%	4	50%
Consultants, contractors, suppliers, or vendors	Action	Internal	5	25%	3	14%	1	13%
Other (please specify)	-	Internal	0	0%	1	5%	0	0%
Total respondents and response rates: Literacy 20, 74%; Greenfield 22, 79%; Environment 8, 73%								

4. So far, what have you gained by being a member of this group? (Select all that apply.)

Answer options	Function	Focus	Literacy		Greenfield		Environment	
			n	%	n	%	n	%
More knowledge about local organizations	Learn	Internal	19	95%	16	73%	7	88%
More knowledge of resources valuable to my organization	Learn	Internal	15	75%	10	46%	2	25%
More access to influential people	Action	External	6	30%	3	14%	1	13%
Stronger connections to other group members	Learn	Internal	16	80%	11	50%	4	50%
More awareness of how networks can benefit my organization & me	Learn	Internal	12	60%	9	41%	3	38%
More knowledge of how to expand my organization's capacity	Learn	Internal	10	50%	7	32%	1	13%
Nothing has changed as of yet	-	-	1	5%	3	14%	2	25%
Other (please specify)	-	-	2	10%	6	27%	0	0%
Total respondents and response rates: Literacy 20, 74%; Greenfield 22, 79%; Environment 8, 73%								

5. What would make it easier for you to be more active in this group? (Select all that apply.)

Answer options	Function	Focus	Literacy		Greenfield		Environment	
			n	%	n	%	n	%
More online group activities	Action	-	6	30%	2	9%	3	38%
More face-to-face meetings, workshops, or events	Action	-	6	30%	7	32%	3	38%
More focus on common concerns, priorities, and tasks	Action	External	13	65%	16	73%	4	50%
More resources to help me & my organization meet its goals	Learn	Internal	12	60%	6	27%	4	50%
More examples of how organizations can work together	Learn	External	7	35%	10	46%	5	63%
More reminders & ideas of how to participate in the network	Share	External	3	15%	6	27%	2	25%
Other (please specify)	-	-	1	5%	4	18%	1	13%
Total respondents and response rates: Literacy 20, 74%; Greenfield 22, 79%; Environment 8, 73%								

FIGURE 3 (continued)

6. Are you aware of mutual concerns that this group is working on? (Select only one response.)

Answer options	Function	Focus	Literacy		Greenfield		Environment	
			n	%	n	%	n	%
Yes, I know of one or more	Action	-	12	60%	16	73%	5	63%
No, no specific concerns have been identified	Action	-	4	20%	0	0%	1	13%
I don't know if specific concerns have been identified	Action	-	4	20%	6	27%	2	25%

Total respondents and response rates: Literacy 20, 74%; Greenfield 22, 79%; Environment 8, 73%

7. So far, how beneficial is this group to you and your organization? (Select only one response.)

Answer options	Function	Focus	Literacy		Greenfield		Environment	
			n	%	n	%	n	%
Beneficial	-	-	10	50%	12	55%	1	13%
Somewhat beneficial	-	-	9	45%	6	27%	4	50%
Not beneficial	-	-	1	5%	1	5%	1	13%
I'm not sure whether it's beneficial or not	-	-	0	5%	3	14%	2	25%

Total respondents and response rates: Literacy 20, 74%; Greenfield 22, 79%; Environment 8, 73%

8. In the future, how beneficial do you think this group will be to you and your organization? (Select only one response.)

Answer options	Function	Focus	Literacy		Greenfield		Environment	
			n	%	n	%	n	%
Will be beneficial	-	-	13	65%	16	73%	2	25%
Will be somewhat beneficial	-	-	7	35%	5	23%	3	38%
Will not likely be beneficial	-	-	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
I'm not sure whether it's beneficial or not	-	-	0	0%	1	5%	3	38%

Total respondents and response rates: Literacy 20, 74%; Greenfield 22, 79%; Environment 8, 73%

9. In the past three-month period, how many times did you ask a question, announce an event, or provide a useful document to group members at a meeting, by email, or on Google Groups? (Select only one response.)

Answer options	Function	Focus	Literacy		Greenfield	
			n	%	n	%
Three or more times	Share	-	2	10%	6	27%
Once or twice	Share	-	10	50%	8	36%
Never have	Share	-	8	40%	6	27%
I'm not sure how to use Google Groups	Share	-	0	0%	2	9%

Total respondents and response rates: Literacy 20, 74%; Greenfield 22, 79% (Note: Environment network members were not asked this question.)

10. How often do you visit the Google Group site? (Select only one response.)

Answer options	Function	Focus	Literacy		Greenfield	
			n	%	n	%
About once per week	Share	-	1	5%	2	9%

FIGURE 3 (continued)

Once or twice per month	Share	-	2	10%	3	14%	14%
When I receive an email notification	Share	-	11	55%	7	32%	32%
Never have	Share	-	6	30%	7	32%	32%
I'm not sure how to use Google Groups	Share	-	0	0%	3	14%	14%

Total respondents and response rates: Literacy 20, 74%; Greenfield 22, 79% (Note: Environment network members were not asked this question.)

11. How easy is it for you to post information on the Google Group site? (Select only one response.)

Answer options	Function	Focus	Literacy		Greenfield		
			n	%	n	%	
Easy	Share	-	4	20%	4	18%	18%
Not very easy	Share	-	0	0%	0	0%	0%
Never tried	Share	-	15	75%	15	68%	68%
I'm not sure how to use Google Groups	Share	-	1	5%	3	14%	14%

Total respondents and response rates: Literacy 20, 74%; Greenfield 22, 79% (Note: Environment network members were not asked this question.)

A contact list of all network members was provided to the researcher by the community foundation program officer. Survey recipients were advised that answering the survey would take five to six minutes and survey results would help the CFMC better understand how nonprofit organizations could effectively collaborate with one another. Survey recipients were assured their individual responses would be confidential and that only aggregated data would be shared. Conducted online using SurveyMonkey, the Network Mindset Survey consisted of 11 questions that allowed members to select either “all that apply” or “only one,” depending on the question, from a list of multiple response options. Responses were collected over a two-week period in Spring 2010. Reminder survey solicitation notices were emailed to nonrespondent network members after the first week. Sixty-six individuals were solicited for survey response; 50 responses were received for a response rate of 75.8 percent. Individual network details follow:

- Literacy Network: 27 members solicited, 20 responses received, 74 percent response rate.
- Greenfield Network: 28 members solicited, 22 responses received, 79 percent response rate.

- Environment Network: 11 members solicited, 8 responses received, 73 percent response rate.

Survey responses (Figure 3) were grouped by network and categorized in two ways. Responses were first categorized as contributions to network sharing, learning, repositing information, or taking group action, in keeping with network operational functions. Responses were also categorized for their internal (self-interested) or external (network-interested) focus. For example, a respondent who wanted to influence another network member was considered to be internally focused, while a respondent who wanted to influence someone or something outside of the network was considered to be externally focused.

The Network Mindset Survey tool and method of analysis found the three networks to be at different life cycle phases and operational functions. Subsequent recommendations for moving each of the three networks to the next stage of its development were therefore specific to each network. The survey responses and analysis are presented below in aggregate to provide an example of how the Network Mindset Survey tool can inform the next steps for network development.

1. What do you want to do as a member of this group? The majority of survey respondents said they wanted to share resources, funding opportunities, or expenses with other organizations (an internal focus). More than half said they wanted to improve their organization's practices, and a similar percentage wanted to learn how other organizations operate. Half of the members wanted to influence or improve a specific service, system, or policy through group action.

Sharing information among network members is an initial step in learning from each other and, subsequently, in taking action to bring about positive community change. Effective sharing requires time and a trusting environment, especially when network members sometimes compete with each other for resources and/or are not accustomed to working together (Hoppe & Reinelt, 2009).

The SNSP Theory of Change states, "Nonprofit organizations have the potential to increase their effectiveness and have greater impacts in the community by actively engaging in a network." Nonprofit engagement in sharing and learning can make important contributions to increasing network operational effectiveness. If mutual sharing and learning are achieved but external action is not occurring, network members will need to move their attention from the formative phase toward the focus and growth phase where action and accomplishment take place (Creech & Ramji, 2004).

2. What do you want to contribute to this group? More than two-thirds of respondents said they felt they had knowledge, expertise, and program materials they wanted to share with their network; more than half wanted to share their experiences in program-service delivery and a similar percentage wanted to teach other members about their organization. These functions are internally focused. Importantly, about half of those surveyed focused on sharing issues or concerns the group could address, and nearly half wanted to share ideas for how group members could better collaborate. These two functions are externally focused.

Network cohesion – indicated by a genuine desire to form partnerships and work with other network members – is an optimal outcome of the sharing and learning phases of network development (Reagans & McEvily, 2003, Creech & Ramji, 2004). At the appropriate stage of network development, network weavers can capitalize on network cohesion by providing encouragement and guidance on productive network action.

3. Whom do you want to influence through this group? About three-quarters of survey respondents said they hoped to influence policymakers, decision makers, managers, and elected officials (external focus). About two-thirds wanted to influence consumers or potential consumers of their organization's services (internal focus). Almost two-thirds of those surveyed also wanted to influence their fellow group members (internal focus). About 60 percent also wanted to influence philanthropic funders (external focus).

Influencing policymakers, decision makers, etc. is a network activity, as network members may generate greater achievements when using a cohesive voice. This is quite a different function than desiring to influence consumers or potential consumers, in which case a network member may gain individual benefits but the group may or may not gain network benefits.

4. So far, what have you gained by being a member of this group? More than 80 percent of the survey respondents said that through network membership they had learned more about other local organizations. Just under two-thirds said network membership strengthened their connections to other group members. Just over half of those surveyed learned about resources that were valuable to their organizations, and slightly less than half reported they learned how networks could benefit their organizations and themselves. Slightly more than 10 percent of those surveyed reported they had not gained anything as of yet as a result of their group membership.

The three most common survey responses indicated respondents' affinity to learning about and connecting with other network members – internally focused products of the formation and

growth/focus life cycle phase. Trusting relationships must be established between network members before attention can be focused on group actions.

In terms of useful action, approximately 20 percent of respondents said they gained access to influential people through network membership. The relative low percentage indicated an opportunity to better capitalize on this benefit of network power.

5. What would make it easier for you to be more active in this group? About two-thirds of those surveyed thought an increased focus on network concerns, priorities, and tasks would encourage greater group activity. More than 40 percent of respondents wanted more resources that would help their organizations meet their goals, and a similar percentage wanted more examples of how groups could work together. About one-third of aggregated survey respondents thought more face-to-face meetings would increase network activity, while about one-fifth thought that on-line activities and reminders would be helpful.

The SNSP Theory of Change emphasized the networked nonprofit potential to “have greater impacts in the community.” By committing to mutual concerns, priorities, and tasks, individual group members can begin concerted action for community change. When network success is achieved and recognized, network members gain confidence and momentum to use network power again. If subsequent experiences are productive, the power of the network becomes self-generating – in other words, sustainable for the duration of its perceived usefulness.

6. Are you aware of mutual concerns that this group is working on? About two-thirds of those surveyed said they knew of one or more mutual concerns their network was addressing. Nearly one-quarter of those surveyed were not sure if common concerns had been identified, and about 10 percent believed their group had not yet identified any areas of common concern to actively address.

Moving networks through their life cycle phases takes time and trust to break through turf- and silo-thinking. Moving too quickly from sharing/learning phases to the action phase could result in less commitment among group members than what is needed to achieve quality group outcomes. All network members will want to cultivate a network mindset, thereby positioning networks for success, especially in critical initial endeavors.

7. So far, how beneficial is this group to you and your organization? Just under half of survey respondents said network membership was beneficial; just under 40 percent said it was somewhat beneficial. Approximately 10 percent of respondents were unsure about whether their network membership had been beneficial or not, and a small percentage said network membership had not been beneficial.

In reviewing responses to this question, it was reasonable to acknowledge the length of time each individual network had been established and the frequency of network meetings and interactions. Because of these differences and because the three networks appeared to be at different phases of development, greater insight for next steps was more apparent when the survey results were examined by network rather than in aggregate.

8. In the future, how beneficial do you think this group will be to you and your organization? Just over half of survey respondents predicted the network would be beneficial in the future; about one-third said the group would be somewhat beneficial. Although none of those surveyed predicted the group would not be beneficial, a small percentage of respondents answered that they weren’t sure whether their group would be beneficial or not. Examining these responses by individual network proved more useful for informing the next steps to be taken in network development.

9. In the past three-month period, how many times did you ask a question, announce an event, or provide a useful document to group members

at a meeting, by email, or on Google Groups?

Survey results indicated that about 40 percent of survey respondents said they had asked a question, announced an event, or provided a useful document to other network members at least one time during a meeting, by email, or on Google Groups in the prior three-month period. Nearly 20 percent had done so three or more times. About one-third said they had not yet engaged in those means of participation, and a small percentage of survey respondents were unsure of how to use Google Groups. This prompted the consideration of providing hands-on training in the use of Google Groups, Twitter, Facebook, and other new technologies to facilitate increased network engagement and the use of the electronic information repository.

10. How often do you visit the Google Group site?

Nearly two-thirds of survey respondents had visited their networks' Google Groups website at least once per month, and more than 40 percent said they had visited the website when they received email notification. Nearly one-third of surveyed network members said they had never visited their network's Google Groups site. A small percentage said they were not sure how to use Google Groups.

While face-to-face meetings are traditionally thought to be optimal for communication, geographic distances and time constraints make electronic networking a bit more attractive. Researchers have found that people's online interactions supplement their face-to-face and telephone communication, without increasing or decreasing these forms of communication (Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001). Internet use is associated with increased participation in voluntary organizations, and is positively associated with participation in voluntary organizations. Taken together, the evidence suggests that the use of the Internet for communication is becoming normalized as it is incorporated into the routine practices of everyday life.

11. How easy is it for you to post information on the Google Group site? Less than one-quarter of those surveyed said it was easy for them to post

information on Google Groups, but nearly three-quarters said they had never attempted to post information on the Google Groups site. A small percentage of survey respondents said they were not sure how to use Google Groups, the main repository of their network documents, upcoming events, and membership information. It was thought that reinforcing the benefits of an electronic network repository such as Google Groups – an easily updated, 24/7-accessible, collaborative format for making connections, sharing information, exploring resources, and learning about solutions – may be needed to help members carry out the purpose of social networking.

Network Sustainability Survey Tool

To explore network sustainability, CFMC conducted a series of four Network Weaver Learning Community trainings between August and October 2010. Network members who had shown a capacity for networking skills were invited to participate. Of those, 14 network members completed 15 hours of interactive training. Training topics included Characteristics of Networks and Weavers; Network Health and Lifecycles; Network Participation, Engagement, and Social Media; and Network Mapping Tools. Training sessions included prior reading assignments, interactive communication exercises, visioning and prioritizing, a network-mapping demonstration, sharing of network survey results, discussions, and the introduction of peer assist and participation/engagement tools.

The Network Sustainability Survey Tool (Figure 4) was created to further an understanding of how to foster networks and explore the potential for funding pilot "network projects" that could address community issues through a networked approach.

At the conclusion of the training series, seven of the trained network weavers completed a survey evaluating their learning experience. Six of seven respondents said the network weaver trainings met or exceeded their expectations, and six said the trainings somewhat or significantly increased their interest in working with a network mindset.

FIGURE 4 Network Sustainability Survey Tool (asked of trained network weavers)

1. In terms of meeting my needs and relevance to my work, the content of the Network Weaver Learning Community training... (Select only one.)

Answer options

- Exceeded my expectations
- Met my expectations
- Did not meet my expectations

2. Since participating in the four-session learning community, has your openness and interest in working with a network mindset changed? (Select only one.)

Answer options

- Increased significantly
- Increased somewhat
- No difference
- Decreased somewhat

3. What kind of ongoing support would help you incorporate what you learned in the learning community into your work? (Choose all that apply.)

Answer options

- Reading materials (articles, books, website links)
- Continued peer exchange with community of practice members (online and/or in person)
- More training sessions (facilitation, dealing with difficult people, mapping software, social media, etc.)
- Other (please explain)

4. What was the most valuable part of the Network Weaver Learning Community training (open-ended response)?

5. What do you believe will be your greatest asset in weaving and working with networks (open-ended response)?

6. What do you believe will be your greatest challenge in weaving and working with networks (open-ended response)?

7. Please describe one area in your network you will focus on in the next 30 days (open-ended response).

When asked to express the most valuable part of the Network Weaving Learning Community training, all seven training participants cited the direct networking opportunity that the training sessions offered (meeting, networking, talking) and five respondents cited learning about various aspects of networking.

While answers varied in response to the question, “What do you believe will be your greatest asset in weaving and working with networks?” four of the seven respondents cited their ability to work collaboratively as their greatest networking asset. With regard to challenges, four of seven respondents noted the investment of time as a specific concern in their commitment to network

weaving. Strategies to address network-weaver challenges included distributing weaver workloads and providing weavers with more networking tools and techniques.

The Network Sustainability Survey Tool and analysis method found a preponderance of trained network weavers wanted continued foundation-sponsored network supports. When asked what kind of ongoing support would be helpful in sustaining their network weaver roles, six of seven respondents expressed a preference for opportunities to continue exchanging information with other weavers and for additional weaver trainings. Follow-up discussion led to scheduling informal, in-person monthly meetings.

Conclusion

This study helped clarify the role of foundations in preparing nonprofits to institute network thinking in advance of directly funding network activities. A method of life cycle analysis and two survey tools were created and applied to three nonprofit networks by the CFMC. The Life Cycle Analysis, Network Mindset, and Network Sustainability assessment tools provided a formalized system to identify network phases and functions. The assessment results and interpretations informed the CFMC's next steps for fostering a network mindset and focus among local nonprofits.

The tools described in this article were designed to be reused with existing and new network members at a later time to better understand the process of network development, stability, and sustainability. Many questions remain regarding the nuts and bolts of when and how foundations might best fund network activities. Nonprofit social network assessment is a relatively young field of study, and the development of more assessment tools such as those discussed here will be of great value in knowing if new networking technologies signal new roles for foundations in nonprofit networks.

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