

What is a network?

‘Network’ is a word used extensively in healthcare research and in health services delivery. It is used as a synonym for ‘partnership’, ‘collaboration’, ‘alliance’ and ‘group’, or more specifically to describe the relationships between people, groups or organisations. (Cunningham et al., 2011)

A network is a group of multiple entities which are tied together with some form of structural peer-to-peer interdependence and common interest. They jointly coordinate their activities without subordination and form relatively stable, flexible working relationships. A network is characterized by open-ended relationships and distributed tasks requiring input from several members. Networks typically help with knowledge translation and promote diffusion and sharing of information and resources (Short et al., 2015).”

Collaborative networks by definition, seek to bring different groups together so that they can work effectively and synergistically together. Networks are increasingly seen as an optimal structure which both organise, and think conceptually about, clusters of diverse individuals, groups or organisations who aim to work together collaboratively (Long et al., 2013)

Networks can be formal or informal; built through social media; be put together purely to access funding, or can be built from grassroots. But networks always require resources - time, energy, practical things such as space to meet and support to travel (Scottish Association for Mental Health n.d.)

Considerations when developing a network

Considerations when developing a network may relate to purpose, people and organisation, as described below (synthesised from Short et al., 2015; Castello et al., 2011 & Scottish Association for Mental Health n.d.)

PURPOSE

- **Shared analysis, vision, interest, and identity** - It is important to have or develop a shared analysis, a shared understanding of the challenges that the network is coming together to address. Related to this are a shared vision, a collective identity, a shared interest, and a shared sense of place. A sustainable network can be about diverse people with a common goal, which helps to focus activities and outcomes. These goals, which might be broad and flexible can help members feel as if they are achieving change.
- **A Purpose or a Goal** - Expectations about setting up a similar network need to be flexible and realistic, and common aims are an essential foundation for an inter-organizational network. Network development is not a linear process. It is important to set shared goals, develop collective plans, create a shared measurement system, and work together on a coordinated, strategic body of work.
- **Shared Event** - An event which forms a cultural ‘artefact’ of the inter-organizational collaboration maybe used as a vehicle to focus the network and promote networked activity. Concrete artefacts such as collaborative events may also be used to measure the success of the network. Such an artefact which engages the inter-organizational network may then further embed the effects of the network into the community.

PEOPLE

- **Members** - Be clear about what members bring and not become over reliant on one organisation or individual. Does it need to have mechanisms in place to be sustainable? Is it dependent on key people? Does it need a leading group or organisation? Membership structures need to remain flexible and inclusive.
- **All Round Participation** - A sustainable network can increase participation, mental capital and community development. It will make sure hard to reach people get to participate. A sustainable network should not be a clique and seen as exclusive from the outside.
- **Clear benefits for member organizations** - Network members are most engaged when there are clear and strong benefits for their organizations and their work.
- **Trust and relationships** - Trust and relationships are the glue that holds a network together. They are built over time as network members work shoulder-to-shoulder on coordinated work that meets their organizations' and their communities' interests. Building trust enables networks to take more risks and share resources more willingly.
- **Power Balance** - A sustainable network develops, nurtures and challenge relationships between partners. Networks may need facilitation to build a sustainable future. Networks operate most effectively and efficiently when power, control, and leadership is dispersed and balanced. Network managers, network staff, or staff at the network's sponsoring organization find ways to share decision-making, direction-setting, and planning with working groups and network members.
- **Interprofessional Collaboration** - The network is stronger with a foundation of Interprofessional Collaboration which may also be described as multi-disciplinary working together and sharing of information depending on the language culture of participating organizations. This concept needs to be embraced by all members of an inter-organizational network in order to promote positive working together.
- **Leadership** - In terms of leadership, there needs to be a driver, or driving group, who are credible and respected by potential members. Distributed leadership is essential in order to avoid imbalances in network engagement.
- **Non-judgemental** - Be radically non-judgemental and non-hierarchical. Everybody has a contribution to make.

ORGANISATION

- **Share Good Practice** - Share good practice and information in a way that partners find easy to access and enjoyable to engage with.
- **Adaptable** - A sustainable network must be organic and change according to circumstances. Conditions will change, and change is the only constant - so a sustainable network needs to be organic to be able to respond to change. Networks must always be creative in their communication and stay fresh and new to attract people.

- **Strong network management** - Strong network management is essential for networks to grow, thrive, and accomplish their goals. Having a capable, committed, skilled network management team is necessary rather than optional.
- **Communication** - Communication within a network is important. People need to be in the loop and feel like they're part of the loop. Conversations among network members need to be focused on things that are of value to them, rather than getting together just to talk and share information.
- **Enough structure, but not too much** – There needs to be a balance between having enough structure and having too much.
- **Resourcing** - A network requires adequate resources for its development.
- **Mutual accountability** - Network members need some way to hold each other accountable for moving the work of the network forward. This accountability can be either formal or informal, but it needs to be effective.

Sustainable Networks Dos and Don'ts

(appropriated from the Scottish Association for Mental Health, n.d.)

- Do stay flexible. Change Networks respond to the environment around them and are co-produced with communities, which means they need to remain responsive, but the values of the network need to be stable and unchanging.
- Don't rely too heavily on key members. Sharing responsibility and building capacity of network members throughout can help make the network more sustainable.
- Do invest in people. People continue to invest and participate in change processes when they feel fulfilled by the process. Supporting people to learn new things and develop in their role means they feel invested in.
- Don't underestimate the challenges of transient groups. Learning from projects who worked with transient groups (students, the prison population) showed that sustainability was a challenge to achieve and measure. Sometimes, more time is needed for recruiting and retaining network members. However, we also saw this as a strength as new and diverse voices are included.
- Do dream. The nature of short term funding and a drive towards measuring concrete outcomes could draw away from what drives people and their vision.
- Don't rush. There is a fundamental incompatibility between taking a sustainable approach to change, and one-year funding.
- Do identify what you need to sustain your network. Sustainability cannot always rely on enthusiasm of network members, but may need resources to maintain momentum. This might be in terms of new membership, money, admin support or space.

Examples of Bereavement Networks

The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement - <https://www.grief.org.au>

Loss and Grief Practitioners' Association - <http://www.lgpa.org.au/membership>

WA Cancer and Palliative Care Network -

<http://www.healthnetworks.health.wa.gov.au/cancer/home/>

Further Reading

Castelloe, P., Watson, T., & Allen, K. (2011). Building a Sustainable Network: A Toolkit. Asheville, NC: Rural Support Partners.

<http://www.ruralsupportpartners.com/docs/BuildingaSustainableNetwork-AToolkit.pdf>

Cunningham, F. C., Ranmuthugala, G., Plumb, J., Georgiou, A., Westbrook, J. I., & Braithwaite, J. (2011). Health professional networks as a vector for improving healthcare quality and safety: a systematic review. *BMJ Quality & Safety*.

Long, J. C., Cunningham, F. C., & Braithwaite, J. (2013). Bridges, brokers and boundary spanners in collaborative networks: a systematic review. *BMC Health Services Research*, 13(1), 158.

Short, A., Phillips, R., Nugus, P., Dugdale, P., & Greenfield, D. (2015). Developing an inter-organizational community-based health network: An Australian investigation. *Health Promotion International*, 30(4), 868-880.

Scottish Association for Mental Health (n.d) www.seemescotland.org/our-movement-for-change/change-networks/building-sustainable-networks/