

A PRIMER ON NETWORKS

THREE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

In the early stages – and as a network grows and evolves, leaders must give careful attention to three essential elements: purpose, people, and process.

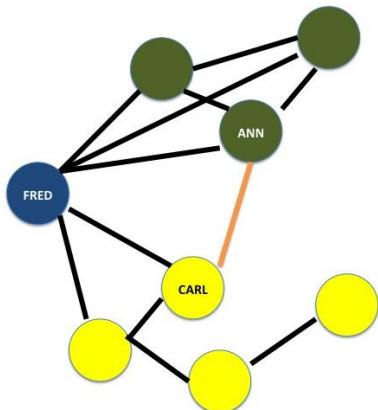
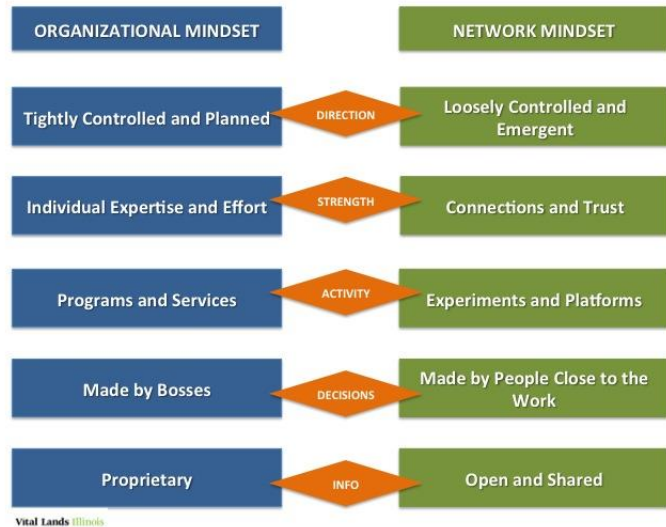
Purpose: Does the group have a clear and meaningful purpose – something that they must do together? Is the context of the problem clear to everyone involved? Are there emerging actions related to the purpose?

People: Are the right people involved? Do people listen and engage with one another? Do people receive as much from their participation as they are expected to give? Are the relationships vibrant?

Process: Is there sufficient process to support the work without the process being overwhelming? Does everyone have an opportunity to add value? Are the communication channels clear? Is decision-making clear and effective? Do people hold one another accountable?

NETWORK MINDSETS

Networks require a different leadership mindset than organizations. Networks are looser than organizations with the strength coming from the trust and connection between people. Networks are platforms for experimentation and action not entities that deliver programs and services. In a network, information is freely shared and decisions are made by the people doing the work.



CLOSING TRIANGLES

People and organizations become more interconnected when individuals are willing to introduce people in their own personal networks to one another. This act of introduction is what we mean by “closing triangles”. When Jeff introduces Katie to Olivia, he is connecting two distinct sets of people and creating a bridge that is stronger than his own connection to the green group and the yellow group.

NETWORK EVOLUTION

Network thinkers Madeleine Taylor and Pete Plastrik created a framework about the evolution of networks. Taylor and Plastrik observe from their own work that networks evolve through three phases: 1) connection; 2) alignment; and 3) production.

At the core, networks are about **connection**, forming links between people and entities as the genius of many networks is the desire to share information and communicate easier. As Taylor and Plastrik note, the information people gain through networks tends to be deeper and more free form than what comes through market structures or hierarchical organizations. All networks begin with an early stage of connectivity and some remain in this phase with an emphasis on sharing information, knowledge, and even other resources.

After deepening connections, some networks move into **alignment**. More than simply linking and freely sharing, alignment networks create and spread a collective value proposition or a shared reason for being together. The people in the network come to share a set of ideas, language, standards, and identity. Participating in the network shapes the culture and work of the entities within the network.

The third phase, and not all networks reach this phase nor should they, is **production**. This type of network fosters joint action. Either the full network or more likely subgroups within the network focus on producing outcomes that they cannot do alone. As an example, coalitions interested in policy change are typically production networks. To reach the production level, networks must develop the structures and capacity to plan together and maintain clear agreements about who will do what. They must have the ability to coordinate work, which is more challenging than solely communicating.

Like most profound frameworks this one is simple and helpful. We use it to help a network understand their identity and what challenges and opportunities might be emerging. We also use it to help a network claim their place and know that they do not have to focus on joint action if that is not their core purpose. Some networks have used it to realize having produced big results it is time to move back into connection and alignment.

