RURAL HEALTH INITIATIVE
Network Leadership

What is Network Leadership?

Network leadership is the capacity of many people in a county to work together to build an effective network to solve problems. It complements organizational leadership, which will continue to be needed for planning and coordination. When a network develops the leadership capacity of many participants, it expands the capacity to solve very complex and intractable problems.

There are four key roles that are part of network leadership. Network participants need to make sure that many different people in their communities are filling these roles, not just staff of a backbone organization.

Connector
- Connect people in the network, often using network maps
- Build a network culture and mindset to increase openness, inclusion, innovation, experimentation, collaboration and learning

Facilitator or Convener
- Convene stakeholders to identify unmet needs and become engaged in change
- Convene core group to coordinate the network

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Project Coordinator
- Help people find others who are interested in working on a particular aspect of the problem
- Help people engage in collaborative action through working groups and projects

Network Guardian
- Coach and train others to take on network leadership roles
- Set up support structure for the network that includes communications, restructuring money, tracking, learning and evaluation

How does organizational leadership differ from network leadership?

In a traditional organization a small group of managers often develops a plan and objectives for others to follow. In a network, individuals are encouraged to take leadership by joining with others and initiating activity. Usually these actions are emergent – they come out of stakeholder convenings or working groups as unmet needs and/or opportunities for change are identified. Network leadership supports actions as they arise, helping people interested in a particular action collaborate and coordinate their actions. They let go of control of outcomes.

Chart 1. Comparison of Organizational and Network Leadership

Organizational Leadership	Network Leadership
Based on position, authority	Based on role, behavior
Few leaders	Everyone can take on leadership role as needed
Leaders tend to broadcast information in a one-way relationship	Network leadership is about engaging participants and two-way discussions
Leaders often tell others what to do	Many people initiate action on their own
Leaders tend to want to control actions and communication	Leadership provides facilitation and support so others can act
Leaders often withhold certain information from other employees	Leadership is about encouraging openness & transparency
Leaders often direct others to act	Leadership allows the network to be emergent and let things happen
Top down	Bottom up
Leaders make sure tasks completed	Leadership helps participants identify breakthroughs
Individual	Collective
Evaluation	Reflection
Planning	Innovation and Experimentation
Provide service	Support Self-organization

How do we develop leadership?

Network leadership cannot be developed solely through traditional training. Network leadership is most effectively developed as small groups of people learn about new concepts and practices, try them out in their networks, and then help each other make sense of that experience through peer support sessions.

The goal of network leadership development is to encourage an initial core of leaders to begin to develop and support additional network leaders by helping a less experienced person (or persons) initiate an activity, find others to work with them to implement that activity, and then reflect how it worked or did not work well.

Case Examples

In rural Michigan, people from local networks have been using a short survey of network behaviors that they take on their cell phones to increase their awareness of areas that are challenging, both for themselves as individuals and as a network. This way they can help each other shift to a network mindset. The Rotary Foundation also provided training for area consultants so that they could provide support for network leadership development in their region. [1]

Innovation funds that offer small amounts of money to groups that want to work on a collaborative project are a simple way to create new network leadership. In southeastern Ohio, the Yellow Root Fund provides grants from $50 to $1500 for about 15 collaborative projects to support community projects in very rural communities. Many people were able to develop collaborative leadership skills as a result of this process. [2]

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[1] Rotary Charities of Traverse City, 2015

[2] Foundation for Appalachian Ohio, 2005

Additional Resources

Holley, June (2012). *Network Weaver Handbook: A guide to transformational networks*. Athens, OH: Network Weaver Publishing.

Leadership and Networks: New Ways of Developing Leadership in a Highly Connected World
http://leadershiplearning.org/system/files/LLCNetworkNLfinal4.pdf

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