

(draft work in progress)

Transformative Networking for Organizational and Community Change

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Abstract

The internet and social media platforms have enabled networks of people to easily organize around areas of common interest within and between organizations. The ability to search the breadth and depth of information available on the internet also enables identification of experts and commonality among change initiatives. As networks continue to organize people and activities, new opportunities arise in purposefully designing networks around Communities of Interest to encourage collaboration and peer-support for change leadership. Theoretical support for the potential impact such networks might have comes from the fields of knowledge management, complexity science, collective behavior, and social network analysis.

Introduction

The informal organization has long been a critical way organizations accomplished work, effectively focusing on the organization's mission and vision while working around the bureaucracy oftentimes created by the formal organization's policies and procedures. Networking has been at the center of such informal organizing as people extend their network of contacts across work interactions, members of past peer groups, and professional relationships. Knowledge management systems have formalized many of these networks through collaboration platforms, Communities of Practice, expertise locators, and shared document storage. Similar network structures are enabled outside the organization through the growing number of social networking sites that organize loosely around common interests or just a shared platform for connecting to "friends" and those with similar interests.

While powerful in their ability to connect people, most platforms either focus on project-oriented collaboration with a specific lifecycle or groups designed to grow membership over time. Lacking has been the network structure for dynamically connecting people as interests converge while also permitting the network structure to dynamically change as goals are accomplished and membership shifts with changes in personal interests. To be truly transformative as a network, the structure must be capable of operating at multiple levels that permit communities of interest to be identified while also morphing into new structures that dynamically meet changing needs within the community. With continued development of web 3.0 technologies come some new, open source platforms that might gain widespread usage and thereby transform the way networks of people interact and work together.

The opportunity that is now becoming possible is designing a template for a network structure that enables communities of interest to be identified through the meta data and artifacts

within the community (profiles, documents, and communication in various forms). Similar attempts have been made in earlier knowledge management initiatives when a “build it and they will come” approach was used to bring people together. Often missing in the past though was a specific need to get together and minimal structure that sought to initiate such connections. The new opportunity is networking at different scales with purposeful actions to connect the connectors among existing networks built around similar needs or interests. This opportunity is transformative networking – if a critical mass of like-minded people were networked, how might their collective vision be transformative?

Theoretical Underpinning

Communities of Practice have been found to be an effective Knowledge Management technique, establishing relationships between people or groups with similar interests. Such relationships assist in identifying expertise and sharing knowledge as trust is established within the community. What has been learned about forming and nurturing Communities of Practice that might be applied to areas of interest that span organizations or communities?

Social Network Analysis examines network structure to identify connectors and how information diffuses across the network. At a higher level, there exists the opportunity to network connectors across disciplines or to otherwise connect silos of similar interest. How can connectors with similar interest be identified and connected themselves?

Large Group Interventions establish a safe environment for small group dialogue within the larger group. This establishes intimacy for discovery of mental models in use and identifies areas of commonality. Yet, processes are also available for scaling the learning within small groups to the larger structure. While there are many large group methodologies, most involve

face-to-face settings spanning a couple days. How might this methodology be moved to a virtual environment with on-going interaction with near-continuous dialogue spawning new sub-groups of interest? At the same time, when should virtual communities be convened for infrequent face-to-face interaction?

Complexity Science offers an explanation for how shared interest can reach a tipping point for self-organization that builds upon itself with positive reinforcement. The Power Law also hints at the possibilities from having numerous, small initiatives for finding significant points of leverage versus the traditional attempt at creating a large-scale impact through isolated, focused plans. While it is not possible to predict what might emerge, self-organization will occur as people vote with their feet. How might more, locally original initiatives be cultivated with a mechanism for nurturing those generating increasing interest from a widening group of stakeholders?

Swarm Intelligence addresses how knowledge and decisions can be produced by simple decision-making rules that are local, yet capable of driving collective action. While the resulting decisions may be suboptimal, they are sufficient and capable of overcoming any sub-optimality through quick response time and adaptation to changing conditions. What are the “simple rules” that would enable dynamic networks to form around common interests while also supporting the knowledge sharing needs of a larger, more general network of networks?

New leadership models are being proposed to address the distributed leadership model where a single leader does not exist (collective leadership) or is shared among group members. The traditional leader-followers model is giving way to a DAC (directive, alignment, and commitment) model of leadership that can be enacted with collective leadership. What is the minimum structure required to permit such shared leadership to emerge?

Next generation social media platforms built on Web 3.0 technologies provide new possibilities of building dynamic network structures that form, merge, and morph to meet the evolving needs of those involved. While traditional online groups are structured to grow membership, these new forms can follow the Power Curve using large networks to serve as communication channels and smaller, embedded networks to collaborate on common issues. What is the mix of network structures required for effective communication across and between multiple sub-networks while allowing collaboration groups to informally form and morph as member interests evolve?

Next Steps

While still conceptual, transformative networking offers the possibility of leading change through the networking of those already interested or involved in similar change initiatives, effectively tearing down existing silos of practice that exist across disciplines and fields of work. Each area above offers suggestions on how to approach and structure such a network as the underlying technology continues to develop and improve in response time necessary to effectively enable such networks to organize and thrive.

The next step is to develop a proof of concept built on the theoretical underpinnings above, possibly using Google Wave as the collaboration platform. The focus will be on building Communities of Practice around root-cause issues crossed with geographic location. A knowledgebase and educational component would be complementary activities. The structure will be built around a vision that is thought to attract sufficient interest to reach the critical mass required for self-organized activity to occur. This vision is: to collectively work to identify and address root-cause drivers of the conditions that limit the potential for what our organizations

and communities might become. The structure itself will be guided by three principles: (a) collective effort to improve the quality and quantity of content shared across the networks and how it might aid others lead change initiatives, (b) actively connect others who are found to be working in isolation, and (c) build a shared vision to develop a transformative network for organizational and community change, being recursive in nature. Such an initiative also establishes a research laboratory for testing new organization designs built around networks of networks leveraging those who self-nominate themselves as connectors.

Preliminary Bibliography

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