

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN ASSESSING NETWORK EFFECTIVENESS

What are the characteristics of a healthy network or a network-centric project? Just as the meaning of “healthy” differs for people depending on factors like age, gender and genetics, there’s no universal picture of network health. However, as with people, there is some consensus about what healthy tends to be, and conversely, what unhealthy looks like for networks. Here are important attributes of healthy networks, followed by several related questions to consider when you’re assessing what a network needs and how its doing.

1. **VALUE.** Effective networks offer multiple doors of entry – a range of value propositions that will resonate with diverse motives for participation. They also outline clearly for participants what can be expected from the network and what will be expected of the participant in return.
 - How broad versus targeted does the purpose need to be?
 - Is there a range of value propositions available?
 - What value do members get? What do they give? Is the exchange clear?

2. **PARTICIPATION.** Participants in healthy networks are connecting with others and engaging in network activities. There is an environment of trust and reciprocity nurtured through distributed leadership, and an established and enforced code of conduct.
 - Is there ample trust and reciprocity? Are there systems, practices, capacity in place for nurturing trust and reciprocity?
 - What stakeholder groups are present? Are some groups more heavily engaged than others? Who is not participating who ought to be?
 - How porous are the boundaries? What are the relationships with other networks?
 - How big does the network need to be?

3. **FORM.** The network form should reflect the purpose. For example, if the purpose is innovation there should be a large “periphery” – individuals who are loosely connected around the edges of the network and who bring in fresh ideas.
 - What form is needed at different stages in the network’s life cycle? What is the ideal network form in one year? Three years? Five years?
 - How tight or how loose is the network structure? What's the balance needed?
 - How important are strong versus weak ties? Do some relationships need to be strengthened? Do new connections need to be added to the network?
 - What’s the role of the periphery, if any? Is it being optimized?
 - What’s role of the center, or hub, if any? Is information and action flowing through the hub(s)? Is there a bottleneck?

4. **LEADERSHIP.** Leadership in healthy networks is shared and distributed widely. Ideally there are *many* participants exercising leadership, by weaving connections, bridging differences and inspiring participants to recognize and work toward shared goals.

- What are the leadership roles needed in the network? Who convenes it? Facilitates it? Weaves it? Coordinates it? Champions it? Is there ample leadership capacity?
 - How is responsibility shared across the network?
 - How are decisions made?
5. **CONNECTION.** Connectivity throughout the network should be dense enough that if highly connected participants leave the network remains strong. Ample well-designed space, online and in person, and effective use of social media can facilitate these connections.
- What are the spaces for network connection? When and where does the network meet?
 - What infrastructure is needed to maintain and/or strengthen connection?
 - Are there multiple venues for making connections? How are online and in-person opportunities for connection integrated?
 - How open versus closed should the spaces for network connection be?
6. **THE CAPACITY TO TAP THE NETWORK'S ASSETS.** Healthy networks operate on the premise that the assets they need are resident within the network. They have systems and habits in place for revealing capacity – like talent, resources and time – and tapping that capacity.
- Can the network find and tap network assets (e.g., money, relationships, talent)?
 - How quickly does information about network assets flow through the network?
7. **FEEDBACK LOOPS AND ADAPTATION.** Networks are dynamic; what is needed and works today may be different tomorrow. Healthy networks have feedback loops in place that enable continuous learning about what works and what's needed, with input from across the network. Then they adapt and act based on their new knowledge.
- How does the network know if it's working or not, and how does it make needed adjustments?
 - How does the network listen to its participants?