

# Tips and Tools for Network-Centric Grant Making

## Questions for consideration when investing in a network-centric project

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 investing in network-centric projects.<sup>61</sup>

**1 VALUE.** Effective network-centric projects 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?

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- 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?

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## Supporting network-centric projects: pitfalls to avoid

Don't:

- Assume that by investing in networks you're solving a lack of democratic participation. Creating network space alone won't increase participation if there are still barriers like language and digital access.
- Invest in networks without a commitment to understanding network dynamics and experimenting with a network mind-set.
- Hire someone to be the “network person.” Initially it may be helpful to have in-house leaders to help spread network capacity. But ultimately the responsibility for working with a network mind-set needs to be shared.
- Push networks to centralize and create formal structures in order to manage the influx of money when the network doesn't otherwise need to establish these structures.
- Assume that models of organizational effectiveness can be applied to strengthening networks.
- Apply conventional evaluation criteria to assessing network impact.

## UNDERSTANDING NETWORKS FOR GOOD

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### **Building Smart Communities Through Network Weaving**

An introduction to the basics on networks, how they evolve and how they can be shaped for social impact, illustrated through a case study.

Valdis Krebs and June Holley. 2006.  
ONLINE: <http://j.mp/ql8Pd>

### **Net Gains: A Handbook for Network Builders Seeking Social Change**

A handbook covering the basics on networks –including their common attributes, how to leverage networks for social impact, evaluating networks, and social network analysis.

Peter Plastrik and Madeleine Taylor. 2006.  
ONLINE: <http://j.mp/hRzYJc>

### **"The Networked Nonprofit"**

An article about how nonprofit leaders are achieving greater impact by working through networks. Includes detailed examples.

Jane Wei-Skillern and Sonia Marciano. 2008.  
ONLINE: <http://j.mp/bqN4ZL>

### **The Networked Nonprofit**

A book rich with examples on how nonprofits are using social media to “power social networks for change.”

Beth Kanter and Allison Fine. 2010.  
ONLINE: <http://j.mp/du78Sq>

### **Net Work: A Practical Guide to Creating and Sustaining Networks at Work and in the World**

Theory and practical advice for how to create and sustain networks.

Patti Anklam. 2007. ONLINE: <http://j.mp/eQbqCz>

### **Working Wikily**

An article about social change networks and how to work with a network-mind-set.

Diana Scarce, Gabriel Kasper and Heather McLeod Grant. 2010.  
ONLINE: <http://j.mp/d98g0a>

## INVESTING IN NETWORKS FOR GOOD

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While grantmakers have been investing in networks for years, there have been limited efforts to codify and capture effective network-centric grant making practices. Contributors to this essay and others are working on the development of materials that will help advance the practice. Specifically, stay tuned for:

### **A Funder’s Guide to Networks**

The Network of Network Funders, Monitor Institute and Grantmakers for Effective Organizations are developing a how-to guide for grantmakers who are intentionally investing in networks and asking questions like: What should I invest in? How should I approach due diligence and impact assessment when supporting networks? How can I work with a network mind-set?

Fall 2011.

### **Leadership and Networks: Bringing a Network Lens to Leadership and a Leadership Lens to Networks**

The Leadership Learning Community, a learning network dedicated to transforming the way the social change leadership development work is conceived, conducted and evaluated, is spearheading a collaborative research project on leadership approaches that are more inclusive, networked and collective. The publication will address questions such as: Why do networks require a different kind of leadership and what does it look like? How can grantmakers and leadership program designers develop leadership with a network mind-set and skills?

Summer 2011.