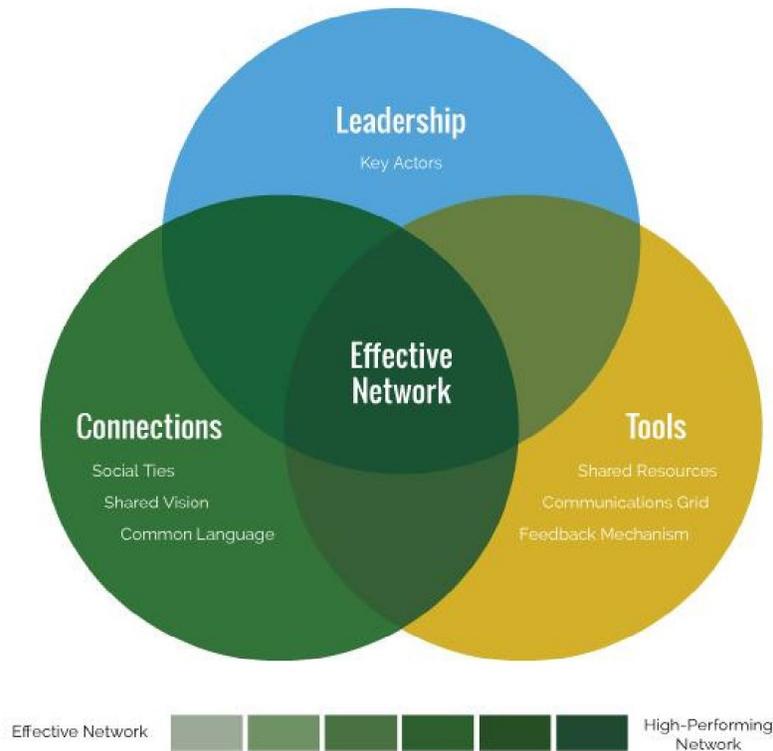


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The Seven Elements of an Effective Advocacy Network

There are Seven Elements that must be present in order for an advocacy network to function at its highest capacity: Social ties, a communications grid, a common language, a clear vision, shared resources, actors and feedback mechanisms. Though we tease these elements apart for discussion, each element is essential—and an effective network requires each of them in order to succeed. The easiest way to visualize this concept is through a Venn diagram like this one, where the center represents an effective network.



Social Ties

Building social ties among the people in a network is a smart and strategic investment, and an essential step in creating trust and working together effectively. Trusting one another allows for communication with fewer misunderstandings, makes it easier for people to overcome strategy disagreements, and facilitates collaboration, even when the work of advocacy and social change strains the participants with increased demands. Social ties can be built in various ways: in-person events like happy hours, meetings, retreats and training sessions; online activities such as webinars, conference calls and e-newsletters in which network participants share their experience and expertise with one another; or through collaboration on network projects.

Communications Grid

All networks need a way that members can engage in various types of conversations and exchanges (one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many). One channel alone may not provide a way to facilitate each type. These many channels online and offline are the “communications grid” of the network, and include channels for aligning work, solving issues and building identity as a group. A strong communications grid also facilitates the ability to filter messages and noise, and serves as a distribution backbone for feedback and the delivery of messages. It supports users if they need to segment and communicate to audiences in multiple ways across all boundaries of organization, geography and time.

Common Language

A common language is an integral part of any successful advocacy network—it reinforces the identity of the network and works to resolve any conflict. Being able to understand jargon, acronyms and organization or movement-specific terms and phrases ensures that all members are on the same page, helps cut down on confusion and makes it easier for members to talk through their problems and collaborate.

Shared Resources

Networks don't need to own and operate assets in the same ways traditional organizations or firms do, and they can be used to effectively manage access to shared resources that users can utilize as a benefit of being a part of the network. Shared resources not only provide power and value to users, they are often key to attracting participation and creating deeper conversations about governance and protocols for the use of a network. Providing capacity for shared resources allows participants to pool assets, skills, talents, experiences, expertise, services and funding streams. This can ultimately save the network and its members time and money because they can access resources on demand rather than starting from the ground up. Examples of shared resources in the private sector include things like zipcar, cloud storage or time shares. In an advocacy context they can include organizers, email lists, data or photos.

Vision

Having a clear vision is a must for any successful advocacy network. This involves working with network participants to define the vision and helping participants understand the advantages of being a part of the network. This vision ultimately guides the network culture and helps participants focus their activities. Not having a clear vision can lead to lack of understanding and lost time when trying to clear up misunderstandings among members.

Actors

Each network must have actors—people who drive the activities of the network by monitoring resources, creating messaging, outlining participant responsibilities, receiving feedback and more. Ultimately, these actors will drive the network to take actions and leverage the existence of the network for their benefit, while encouraging others to do the same. If actors aren't known, or if the pool of actors is too homogeneous, it can result in a shortage of fresh ideas and approaches to problem-solving. Alternatively, a network may struggle because not enough people dedicated to keeping it operational have been identified, or it could have the opposite problem: "too many cooks in the kitchen."

There are four different types of actors: drivers, weavers, supporters and operations-focused actors. These roles are fluid, and actors often shift from supporter to driver or step in to help make connections, moderate a discussion or plan a major campaign. Network drivers are leaders in the field that participate in networks specifically to tap into the resources they need to organize change. Weavers are both the welcome committee and those that help reconnect people across the network. They help smooth the competition among drivers that pull the network in different directions, and help debrief and learn lessons from all the participants. Supporters are there to be a resource to others, adding voice, sharing resources and being willing to contribute to efforts to create change. And finally, the operations people make sure the lights stay on, and that the services and basic rules of the network are followed.

Feedback

Feedback helps leaders and other participants understand the trends, resources and needs of the entire network. A network must have the ability to gather feedback that will help them grow and refine their activities, and a network's members must be able to see its successes and trends. The network's leaders must then respond to the feedback and effectively readjust network actions and priorities based on this information. Without feedback, organizations can be blind to critical information that can help improve it. When done well, incorporating feedback can help refine, strengthen and advance network goals and activities.