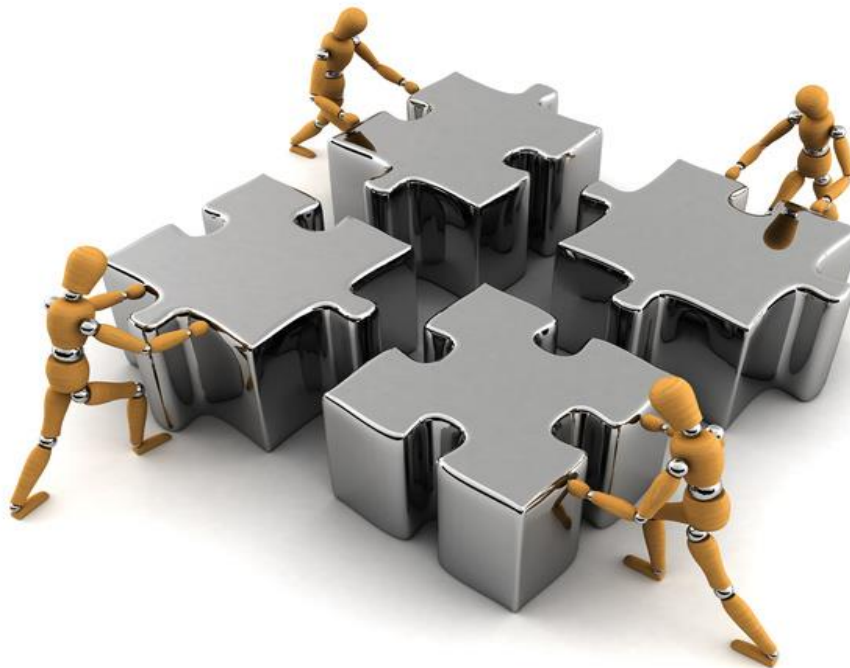


Networks Leadership Summit Series

Bridging Boundaries, Creating Knowledge:
The Power of Good Conversation

Networks Leadership Summit VII

*“If Networks are the answer what is the question:
Rethinking networks”*



November 15, 2013

Participants

Thank you to everyone who took time out of their hectic lives to participate enthusiastically in the 2013 Networks Leadership Summit, part of an ongoing conversation among network practitioners and network researchers with the goal of advancing our collective understanding of inter-organizational networks.

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An Ongoing Evolution

The 2013 Networks Leadership Summit, held in Victoria, B.C. at the Royal Roads University Campus, was the seventh such Summit held in Canada since October 2005. The Summits have historically been invitational events. However, the past five Summits have been accompanied by an open registration Symposium in an effort to allow these conversations on networks to be opened up to a much wider audience. The Networks Leadership Summits and Symposia have been organized by a voluntary, loosely affiliated group of people; a group bound by a shared interest in advancing the thinking and knowledge about networks through the intersection of network research and practice and through the opportunity for lively conversations and debates.

Each of the previous six Summits has strengthened our knowledge base on networks and the value they hold as mechanisms for addressing complex issues, promoting effective knowledge mobilization, and creating and managing necessary system change. Many key messages have been generated throughout the course of the Summits, falling broadly under three overarching themes: the essence of networks; implementing and evaluating networks; and using networks to enable change. Concepts within each one of these themes often integrate and link across all three areas of interest. A more in-depth description of some of the key messages that emerged through the first four Summits can be found in the *2009 Summit report: The power of networks in times of change*.¹

The fifth (2010) Networks Leadership Summit was held in Vancouver in conjunction with British Columbia's Provincial Health Leadership conference. The Summit was framed in the context of 'network competencies to deal with complex environments'. Participants targeted one of the ongoing challenges confronting public, nonprofit and the private sectors: 'the creation and effective management of inter-organizational networks'. Managers, clinicians and researchers who wished to better understand network concepts and strategies benefited from conference sessions addressing these issues and learned together about leadership and management in the context of inter-organizational collaboration and networks. The Summit extended the discussions of how best to support more evaluative research and better practice efforts to capture and learn from good practice experiences.

The 2011 Symposium and Summit embraced a Living Systems frame. Overarching themes included: discovering what works from complexity science, eco systems, and natural systems; and an introduction to the life cycle of networks and applicability to public sector inter-organizational networks. The smaller Summit group confirmed the importance of the knowledge that emerged from the life cycle framing. In the time Summit participants spent together – their interests held this conceptual framing but quickly moved to more particular questions regarding how best to encourage better understanding of network value in practice. While the conversation was wide- ranging and generative – participants expressed a particular desire to consider how they might individually and collectively contribute to help networks thrive in practice for social benefit. A number of potential collaborative projects and possibilities emerged including opportunities to better understand the literature base concerning

¹ www.bcahc.ca/net-x/images/nlsivproceedingsfinal.pdf

organizational networks – several possible research efforts – and the potential to build a more practice informed knowledge base going forward.

For the 2013 Symposium, the planning committee landed on the theme of “rethinking networks” in acknowledgement of the frequency with which inter-organizational networks are popping up in the public service sector. A set of big questions emerged from committee deliberations: Are networks becoming the default option for public sector organizations when faced with difficult, let alone intractable, problems – and if so, is this something about which to be concerned? Are networks simply in vogue or are they generally the right approach? Under what circumstances are networks the optimal organizational form? And are we using the term network in the public sector with enough specificity?

Given the questions above, it seemed timely, then, to rethink and question networks on a number of levels. What do theory and practice tell us about the value of networks? What should we be thinking about when considering a network? What do we know about creating and managing networks, whether networks are working, and whether and/or when to sustain or wind them down?

These questions guided development of the Symposium program. The two days were divided into four general topics for discussion. Each topic area was organized similarly in order to maximize interaction among the panelists, among the audience, and between the audience and the panelists.

- 1. Should we be re-thinking networks?** This panel presentation and discussion explored what has changed in the field; theory and practice of the ‘network way of working’; the value proposition that networks offer; and, why and how networks are key to the future of organizational change.
- 2. What do we know about creating and managing networks?** This panel presentation and discussion addressed collaborative governance; leadership and management; how neuroscience can help us understand leadership of and in networks; and lessons from ‘dark networks’.
- 3. How do we know if networks are working?** This panel presentation and discussion focused on the importance of network evaluation, and included an overview and online demonstration of the ‘Program to Analyze, Record, and Track Networks to Enhance Relationships (PARTNER)’ software tool for network data collection, analysis and mapping.
- 4. How do we sustain networks over time or wind them down?** This panel presentation and discussion explored the role of networks in creating, using and exchanging knowledge; how to nurture and sustain networks in the short and long term; whether we need to think about winding down networks or transforming them into new entities and, if so, how and when to do this.

The Symposium concluded with a highly interactive ‘bear pit’ session in which all the panelists revisited the question of whether we should be rethinking networks, and offered up some final thoughts for discussion with each other and the audience.

The Symposium attracted about 90 participants engaged in managing and leading networks, research on networks, or developing policy or funding mechanisms to support networks. People from a wide range of backgrounds, including all of the Symposium panelists and participants from previous Summits, were invited to participate in more in-depth conversation about networks, building on the presentations and discussions from the Symposium. Summit registrants were accepted on a first come, first served basis with the prerequisite that they must also attend the Symposium. Confirmed Summit registrants were also asked to complete and submit, in advance, a short piece of 'homework' providing their perspectives on rethinking networks. Sixteen individuals - from Canada, the USA, and the United Kingdom- stayed on for the Summit.

Starting the Conversation for Summit VII

The Summit day was framed as a more in-depth 'conversation' and envisioned as a unique opportunity to create and contribute to an emergent, free flowing dialogue – and sometimes even fierce debate and deliberation – all with the intent to stretch the collective knowledge about inter-organizational networks. The expectation was that some of the important and enticing ideas generated at the Symposium would provide a foundation for, and weave nicely through, the Summit deliberations. This is indeed what happened.

To kick off the Summit conversation, participants were asked to provide some top-of-mind thoughts from the Symposium and/or from the 'homework' they had done prior. Many of the Summit participants described coming from the Symposium feeling energized, and there was a sense of potentially being at a kind of tipping point in relation to both the understanding of networks and where research efforts should be focused moving forward. This feeling of being energized, however, was tempered by some frustration. The energy was linked to the growing body of knowledge and more nuanced understanding about network structures and processes. The frustration was most visible around why answers to practitioner and funder questions about how best to develop, manage and evaluate context specific networks still remain elusive. Thus, there was both comfort and discomfort expressed about the number paradoxes that emerged out of the Symposium, and the emphasis on the contextual answer of "it depends".

The key themes emerging from these opening comments fell into the following broad categories:

- Networks, mandated networks, and a critical examination of how they fit into broader systems
- Bringing a neuroscience lens to networks
- A more nuanced understanding of networks, paradoxes and "it depends"
- A role for networks in perturbation, dark networks and positive deviance
- Building an accessible knowledge base for networks
- Network evaluation

Highlights of the Summit VII conversation are summarized next under these thematic areas of conversation.

Highlights from the Summit VII Conversation

Networks and how they fit into broader systems

What kinds of networks are we talking about here? Participants had experiences with a variety of networks, including inter-organizational networks, mandated and emergent networks, networks of individuals, and networks that contain a mix of individuals and organizations. The question arose as to whether all of these networks are the same conceptually? There was agreement that, when talking about networks, context clearly matters. Thus there is a need to be clear about how the term 'network' is being used in any particular context, as well as about the purpose of a specific network. Network concepts also can be useful in clarifying what structures would not be considered to be networks.

Because context matters, many answers to questions about best practice in network development and evaluation may be that of "it depends." A part of the "it depends" means undertaking **a critical examination of how networks fit into broader systems**. Networks as a phenomenon have existed for a long time as one kind of adaptation of the system to overcome its flaws. There was candid discussion regarding mandated networks in particular, and whether governments may now be using networks more as a mechanism to 'off-load' issues. That is, governments may now be mandating networks in order to be seen to be doing something to address a complex policy or service issue, but without any real commitment to resourcing or supporting the work of the network. Are networks simply a way for governments to look like they are doing something, with no expectations that a network will have any success? Networks, then, particularly mandated ones, might be a suboptimal solution to the failures of government policy. Perhaps there is a tipping point, where networks were once a legitimate option to improve health and social services, and now there is a need to find new forms that work better?

A question flowing from this discussion then is: **"are these mandated networks actually networks, and if so how?"** One participant involved in a recently mandated network suggested that the perception of having a 'common enemy' (i.e., government) may facilitate network members coming together as a group. If that is the case, and if the intent of a government mandate is to simply offload but not necessarily address a complex issue, then is the network facilitator simply contributing to myth and delusion? Or is the true job of a network facilitator, even in such a case, to contribute to making the partnership real and effective, despite the construction and mandate? Even in a mandated network there is room for subversive influence or 'positive deviance' - perhaps in time they can be effective networks; that is, truly accomplish something to the surprise of government, and/or shake up the status quo in a positive way.

One of the benefits of networks is that they can be nimble enough to take advantage of policy windows. However, a cautionary note was sounded about the need to be careful not to lose the essence of what the network is all about when taking advantage of one of these policy windows. The lesson is not to avoid the policy window, but to enter it carefully while realistically assessing the possible ramifications on the network, both positive and negative. For example, with the

African National Congress (ANC) the policy windows changed over time (which the ANC contributed to changing) so the possibilities for the ANC also changed. An important principle for networks is to pay attention to foundational values, as well as to the more obvious missions and visions (i.e., the 'shiny things').

Bringing a neuroscience lens to networks

“Networks have to be something, as they are everywhere.” From a neuroscience lens, networks within the brain - a complex adaptive system in and of itself - are required to help individuals reach their full potential. Extrapolating to inter-organizational networks, perhaps the focus should be not so much on managing and sustaining networks, but rather on using networks to enable individuals and organizations to flourish and evolve collectively. This fits well with the concept of collaborative advantage; that is, coming together to achieve something that an individual actor cannot achieve alone.

The neuroscience perspective is useful, in that it provides another way of understanding individual behavior within inter-organizational networks. Since the actual interactions in a network are between people and, as individual behavior and understanding is based on how a particular brain perceives things, one can begin to appreciate the variability and complexity of the multitude of relationships within a network. Research indicates that many brain responses are automatic, and it is difficult to undo these (automatic) pathways once entrenched. Summit participants wondered if comparisons at the network level may help enhance our understanding about whether network behaviour also becomes entrenched over time.

It was noted at the Symposium that network members often find it difficult to describe the 'ideal' network; yet there was the sense that knowing something about the 'ideal' network would be helpful in order to move toward it. If we look at our bodies, every cell has the same DNA. However, the way cells differentiate is that they only use a portion of the DNA and they consistently and reliably only use this portion. This is fundamental to the development of multi-cellular organizations, and there may be some lessons here for networks. We bring a certain group of actors together as they all offer a somewhat unique contribution to a larger whole. **From a network development perspective, understanding the core of who you are and what you bring to the network is critically important, as is having some sense of the whole – the big hairy audacious goal (BHAG) that has brought you together.**

Taking brain science into consideration, or thinking more about how we think, may contribute to moving forward with real collective action and distributed leadership. Working in diverse networks exposes people to different ways of thinking and perceiving, which can then lead to more questioning about why network members operate the way they do, and perhaps begin to nudge them to think and behave differently together. One thing we know from neuroscience is that the dominant energy in the group influences overall group energy. Thus, valuing the social dynamic dimension by trying to understand the relationship bonds – the relationship connections and how they change over time - is a critical part of working in networks. In this context, a number of Summit participants expressed having a profound belief in the potential of networks and the need to work in this common, collective form.

Building on this, the conversation turned to **moving beyond structuralism to thinking about how networks can enable human agency**. It is the dynamics of human agency that can really move us as individuals, and therefore influence network development over time; whereas structure is more of a snapshot at one point in time. Perhaps the next phase of network research could usefully focus more on network dynamics in different contexts; that is, research into unpacking the “it depends”. One important process question to continue to explore is, “How can managers in hierarchies work collaboratively and successfully in complex jurisdictions, across sectors and with a diversity of actors and organizations?”

Finally, again building on what is known from neuroscience, if we view inter-organizational networks like any human system, there are shocks that are likely predictable (e.g. funding shocks) and therefore the capacity to weather these shocks could potentially be built in up front. Perhaps there is something from we can learn from resilient family systems about surviving shocks in networks as well. Alternatively, how do we address death and dying in networks, building in capacity for grieving, and providing palliative care to networks?

A more nuanced understanding of networks, paradoxes and “it depends”

Participants frequently came back to the discussion of paradoxes. Some paradoxes identified from the Symposium included: stability vs. innovation; unity vs. diversity; lurk vs. participate; individual organization vs. network value; and integration vs. differentiation.

On the issue of lurking versus participating, there was mixed opinion about whether it was okay to have ‘lurkers’ in a network – people who remain relatively in the background, taking what they can garner from the network, but not making many, if any, active contributions. Some questions were raised, such as, “*Are there different kinds of members in networks? Are lurkers not necessarily a negative thing?*” Not surprisingly, the answers seem to relate back to the purpose of the network and whether active participation is a necessity for network membership; perhaps not in an information-sharing network of hundreds of individuals, but perhaps so in an inter-organizational network that consists of six to eight organizations. So once again; ‘it depends’. This discussion ended on a rather inclusive tone with the suggestion that “*Perhaps we need a hug a lurker campaign.*”

There was some discomfort expressed about the number of paradoxes or dilemmas that emerged out of the Symposium, and the emphasis on “it depends”. In part, this discomfort was related to the ongoing difficulty of justifying investments in, and evaluating, networks in the absence of fixed answers for funders. There was also recognition that networks are not a panacea, but that the potential for this collective work is huge. Developing and working in networks can be hard work, but the potential benefits of ‘the network way of working’ makes it worthwhile. Others expressed a relief to be in a group where one could openly talk about the difficult and rewarding work that characterizes the network way of working. As one individual noted: “*I feel like I’m not crazy...this is the nature of this. We are working in a hierarchy and working in networks; this is hard work.*” So, although the paradoxes can be frustrating, they may also help network leaders relax into the uncertainty, realizing that everyone working in a network is faced with similar uncertainty. This realization is likely a critical piece of network leadership.

While the uncertainties could be frustrating, the **more nuanced discussion about networks was appreciated too**. Participants recognized that the Symposium and Summit planners had done a good job of bringing a diverse group of fields and perspectives together, and this diversity contributed to a more nuanced discussion. **The question of value was described as fundamental to this more nuanced thinking**. One individual stated that the value of networks to them was “the opportunity to develop a culture of systems thinking among people unused to thinking that way”. This connects back to the importance of “thinking about our thinking.” There was also recognition that the value of networks may be different for various network actors, often in distinct contexts. For example funders of networks may value networks differently than network leaders or members.

One example of a more nuanced understanding of networks relates to the task of trying to establish a common vision and goals. Developing the common vision and goals is often viewed as an early network development task. Contrary to this understanding, vision and mission development may not always be the best place to start when forming a network, particularly given that organizations may come into a network with quite different goals and/or ambivalence about the vision. In some contexts a network might want to start with identifying practical ‘projects’ or things to do together that help to build trust and illustrate a different way of working; then come back to the common vision and goals later. In reality, there are often multiple levels of goals in a network. The organizations and individuals who participate in the network need to achieve some things, but the network also needs to have higher-level goals that relate to the collaborative mission and vision.

A role for networks in perturbation, dark networks and positive deviance

There is a role for perturbation in networks. To even begin to address some of the complex issues for which networks are created, some shaking up of the status quo is usually required. The commonalities between, and usefulness of, both ‘positive deviance’ and ‘collaborative thuggery’, were noted by several participants. The utility of ‘positive deviance’ for networks was discussed as a critical skill of robust networks. Differing from the norm in positive ways and/or for positive reasons can become a source of power when change is needed. However, being different can also be risky. Participants expressed interest in considering further how this kind of positive deviance operates in networks both as a source of strength - helping to advance network goals and create change – but also as a source of risk. ‘Collaborative thuggery’, a term coined by Huxham and Vangen, describes the necessity for network leaders to at times move beyond facilitation to manipulating agendas or playing politics within the network in order to advance the work of the network. This could go so far as to ejecting or pushing uncooperative members out.

Related to deviance, a number of people described being interested in the concept of dark networks and what can be learned from them. **All networks are in some respect dark networks, if we mean by that they exist to change the ‘current order’**. Whether a network is dark or bright is a matter of judgment, and can evolve over time. If dark networks by virtue of definition are covert and illegal, what is illegal can change as legislation changes and what used to be covert becomes acceptable and therefore moves into the open. For example, the African National Congress, which at one time was perceived as a dark network, evolved to be what one would call a bright network. If by their very nature networks are there to perturb, dark and

bright networks may share many similar qualities. Regarding the earlier discussion of mandated networks, one wonders if governments that mandate networks really understand what activism or change mechanism they might be seeding. If not, they may get more than they bargained for.

Building an accessible knowledge base for networks

There was an expressed need for evidence-based guidance regarding the development, management, evaluation and funding of networks. Some felt that it seems like the science of networks has not progressed a lot in the past few years or, alternately, if there has been learning from practice it has not found its way into the academic literature. *“There wasn’t much sharing of eureka moments at the Symposium regarding how to actually develop and manage a network...that there must be a kitbag of options that we can articulate more clearly for practitioners.”* This comment spurred much discussion and debate.

Practitioners generally described evidence-informed toolkits and evaluation frameworks as being helpful, although even here there were differences of opinion. While some people in the field may be asking for a checklist, this might not be the accurate language to articulate what they are really looking for; rather they are expressing a need for some foundation on which to guide their work. There was recognition that, given the “it depends”, a toolkit will always be limited. For example, the purpose of the network, the network context, other network characteristics such as whether it’s mandated or not, and the relationship history, all vary widely. Participants queried what supports or information would prove useful – including one not altogether tongue-in-cheek suggestion for a “flying squad” of network facilitators who could go out and provide assistance to others.

There was thoughtful reaction to the inadequacy, but also the reality, of the “it depends”. As the field advances and a more nuanced understanding of networks developed recognizing the multiple dimensions of context in which networks are embedded, there was a sense that we should be able to respond with better, more informed answers to questions being asked about developing, managing, and evaluating networks. That is, there is enough evidence on networks on which to articulate sufficiently some principles to both guide network practice and satisfy funders – and yet a gap seems to remain.

There was considerable conversation – and yes some of it even heated - about the relationship between research, theory and practice; including how challenging it can be to marry the literature on collaboration with the practice of collaboration. With respect to the academic-practice dynamic, it was recognized that this is more complex than evidence-informed practice, in that this dynamic really works both ways. That is, just as research needs to inform practice, practice also needs to form and shape what academics study. It was understood that this is, in fact, happening in many settings, as academic research and theory development is generally based in practice. Thus, while there may be a need for more practice-based knowledge integrated into the academic literature, the actual issue is that little of this practice-based research is written for a practice audience. Many of the Summit participants – academic researchers, practitioners and scholar practitioners – have been involved in writing for practice audiences. However, given the lack of incentives in academic settings for writing for practice audiences, and the lack of incentives in practice settings for taking time to read, reflect, and

write, there is a shared responsibility for generating and mobilizing knowledge that can be used to actually inform both network practice and theory.

There are limitations to thinking about practitioners and academic researchers as two separate entities, as many network researchers have also been actively involved as actors in networks. Also there are many examples of academic researchers and practitioners working collaboratively on research projects in practice settings. Ideally, every new network would have both practitioners and researchers at the table from the start. This would provide an opportunity to address the gap in knowledge about the evolution of networks over time. A multiple case study approach using action research was thought to be promising. This would allow ongoing learning to be built into the process, with this learning then used to inform the ongoing evolution of the network. It would be equally important that this internal learning be shared through publications and presentations to interested external audiences. Given how time-consuming action research can be, however, it would never and should never be the only approach. Networks are complex entities usually in complex settings – they in turn require a diversity of evaluative research approaches to be used to understand them.

Ultimately, the origins of the Symposium and Summit series are rooted in a desire to bring researchers, practitioners and scholar practitioners together to advance the collective knowledge about networks. These events are one way of ensuring that research evidence informs network practice, that practice questions inform research, and that opportunities are created to work truly collaboratively. Funders in the room wondered about the role of the funder in the network world; and whether, for example, this role extends beyond providing dollars to seed networks to include building capacity for ‘the network way of working’. Indeed, supporting these kinds of conversations is one mechanism for supporting capacity building.

We need to think more on the almost inherent lack of alignment of academic and practice based rewards and recognitions if we want and need more robust and collaborative goals and relationships between universities and practice settings. Universities need the grants and the publications. Practitioners need knowledge that will help them develop and manage their network(s) more successfully. The collaborative advantage here is that only by working together can we develop useful knowledge to advance both theory and practice.

Evaluating networks

Why and how we should be evaluating networks was a thread woven throughout the Summit conversation.

Discussion of the limitations of social network analysis (SNA) led to wondering about the key performance indicators and targets that can be used when evaluating networks, and then some unpacking of the methodological dynamic. SNA is a good tool to assess the structure of relationships in networks, and a valuable planning and quality improvement (QI) tool – in that the knowledge generated through SNA can be actively used to work on the development of specific relationships assessed as requiring attention. The PARTNER tool (www.PARTNER.net) presented at the Symposium was seen as a readily available SNA resource for network practitioners.

SNA does not address performance, however. While measuring relationships is important, it is clearly not a sufficient indicator of success for funders (and others), so network evaluations must go beyond measuring relationships to look at how networks contribute to other outcomes of value, both process and impact. Neither does SNA stand on its own. For example, what does a strong relationship actually mean? There could be a strong tie on communication, but that may be just because “we don’t have our act together”. Using qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews, to generate knowledge about context is also equally important, as is measuring a network against its stated goals. **By putting all of these pieces together a robust picture can be painted of the structure and nature of the relationships in a network, as well as of the impacts of the work of the network.**

Being clear about why we are measuring what is being measured, and how it is best measured (i.e., the methodological dynamic) is critical, and ideally this work should be done when the network is first starting up. When trying to determine the key performance indicators and targets, then, one must be sure both that the indicator relates to the focus of measurement and that what is being measured is what is important. There is evidence from past research that good network processes will lead to positive impacts, but it is important to try to measure both processes and impacts. With respect to measuring process outcomes, the concept of business supply chains may be useful, as it involves identifying and paying attention to the steps along the way to achieving impacts. The ultimate desired impact is related to the purpose of the network and the proposed advantage of the collaborative.

When talking about complex problems, however, the network will only be one contributing factor to any achieved outcomes. Frustrating as it may be, there will be no simple cause and effect relationship. An important evaluation question then might be *“what would it be like if the network did not exist; how would things be different?”*

There are multiple (levels of) outcomes that could be measured in a network evaluation. There is research showing that diversity of goals across networks is more common than similarity. **There are always going to be multiple goals, and different levels of goals in a network, as organizations and individuals who participate in the network also need to achieve some things if they are going to continue to participate in the network.**

Funders talked about needing more help in understanding how networks work. Helping funders to have a better understanding of what we should be measuring in network evaluations is also important. There was recognition that having to come up with pseudo goals “sucks the life out of people” – in other words, it can diminish motivation or contribute to disillusionment. Recognizing and harnessing the power of stories was discussed as a good strategy for illustrating how networks make a difference to the people involved in the network as well as the people the network was created to help. Stories can be an excellent mechanism for describing context, and given the importance of context to understanding a particular network and how it works, a research approach to stories can illustrate in compelling ways how a network is making a difference.

Reading Between the Lines of Conversation

We hope this brief summary of the thematic issues that Summit participants addressed with energy and enthusiasm demonstrates the importance of holding Summits and underlines the desire and need for continuing these kinds of conversations. Yet, in some ways we felt this latest Summit ended too soon and left us with some unspoken and unfinished thoughts, tensions and questions. In a bit of an experiment, we chose to extend the conversation beyond the day and invited some additional reflections from participants. These post-Summit musings have been collected and are shared to extend additional learning from our conversation. This is what we heard.

Post-Summit Reflections and Rants

The Summit was indeed a very good experience with strong opinions on a number of issues related to networks as well as areas of real agreement. In looking back, I wish we had time enough to try to reach either a measured agreement or clear areas of disagreement in a final session, or even a consensus statement on next steps like the one we were able to develop several years ago in Banff. For my money, I think that the idea of a “practitioner’s network toolkit” is worth a serious discussion. I guess I was struck by the difference of opinion over whether academics produce “tools” that practitioners can use and whether what we academics think of as useful tools are actually useful to practitioners. I think this is a challenge to Siv, Michael and me, among others who have been under the impression that much of what we have written about networks did have a practitioner focus. I think it is also a challenge to practitioners to use what is available from PARTNER, books like Huxham and Vangen, Agranoff and McGuire, the Popp, MacKean, Casebeer, Milward, and Lindstrom, “Inter-organizational Networks Literature Review”, to the IBM Reports when they confront network problems to see if this knowledge is useful in practice. If it isn’t, we need to go back to the drawing board. In any case, I think this is a discussion worth having.

~

Thanks for these reflections - I had some similar ones. I found it odd that we seemed to get so stuck in a practitioner vs researcher paradigm. As someone who has used network research findings and the academic literature a great deal in her practice, I found that a bit frustrating and did not want to be pigeonholed. In thinking about the various Summits that I have participated in over the years, the value of bringing network researchers and practitioners together is the "ah ha's" we can all have and the synergy we can create for advancing the knowledge of networks. I believe we did have some of this, but agree time was not our friend in terms of coming to some resolution and/or course of action. However, it was a stimulating discussion and, in many ways, has provoked more afterthoughts than other Summits. I'm pretty sure this means we need another Summit to continue the conversation!

~

I have been pondering the same dilemma....and here are my observations:

A decade and more ago, those who got involved with ‘networks’ were self-selected; they came to

new positions related to 'networks' by choice, usually building on personal/professional interests, values and inherent skills. Now, in organizations, employees are being 'assigned' to 'do a network' --- as they would have had work assignments all along. It's as if they were assigned a project on (if we were to take a hospital as an example): patient satisfaction, or improving discharge planning. They have not chosen to be involved in a network project. So they bring the same questions as they would to any project – what have others done that I can build on/adapt? They look for recipes...in the same way they would look for (and expect to find) – for example - a now-fairly standard approach to strategic planning, they look for a standard approach to networking. This is a very different conversation than what we have enjoyed – as folks who have chosen research or participate in networks.

~

I think these conversations are fiercely important and I think I may like this new opportunity for post-Summit reflections and rants too! These conversations are so useful because they do irritate and frustrate us - mostly in good and important ways. This Summit took us back into a place of tribes - it was an interesting return to terrain we maybe need to go back over from time to time? For me it's an open and troubling question - so instead of answers, I leave us with some musing/ranting...hopefully some of it is relevant?!

Is it important whether we identify as 'academics' or 'practitioners' or what's that new identity? - 'knowledge brokers'? I have a deep suspicion we all broker knowledge - use evidence and experience - on a pretty regular basis - what we need to do is keep talking to each other for sure regardless of our various hats. And then there are those of us who resist labeling - who fall between the cracks - have had multiple identities and identity crises over the years - and then there are those of us who are simply in a regular state of confusion and denial! What is wonderful about the Summit - is that it allows all of us a seat at the table. From my perspective - we haven't come close to finishing a number of threads of conversations begun at the last Summit and several that carry over from the past. So let's keep talking for sure.

Would it help if we talked about the 'ing' rather than the 'it'? ...So talked together about researching and practicing and brokering and networking and the other 'ings' that might take the field/s of interest further?

What if we left our formal identities at the door and just talked about the issues and challenges and opportunities that we face separately and together - at least the ones relevant to networks - and especially the ones that excite and energize us...wouldn't that be positively deviant?

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Wow this is fascinating! What a privilege it is to share time & ideas with people who think deeply about this stuff! It's probably a symptom of working in & around the UK's NHS for the last 25 years+ that brings on nausea in me when I hear the term 'toolkit' mentioned (apologies) I think the term, (if not the very concept), has been done to death over here, (albeit in different contexts), and in part that explains my reaction. But I also find counter-intuitive the idea of trying to capture and codify wisdom on something as diverse, rapidly evolving and context-specific as networks, (at least of the virtual variety). 15 years ago a highly respected 'expert' here in the UK opined that CHAIN would never be sustainable because it did not conform to the expectations of a community of practice. 15 years later I would argue that it has endured, evolved and grown

precisely because it is not a community of practice... However a toolkit devised in 1998 based on expert opinion would probably have led us to stifle its development. I would therefore favour much more open-ended ways of sharing learning, which would nurture non-conformism and experimentation as much as highlighting aspects of networks that have been historically successful (or not).

The call for emphasis on the 'ing' element of what we all do also is compelling. As is the wry observation about people today being assigned 'to do' networks by their organizations or bosses, in a way that is alien to those of us who blazed, (or stumbled along) a trail, guided by intuition that we were on to something, and nurtured by naïve enthusiasm and supportive colleagues. But on the other hand... and much more optimistically, we are now entering an era when the upcoming generation is familiar and at ease with networking to a degree that was pretty well unimaginable even a decade ago. That must create huge opportunities...

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What a lovely conversation - as was the Summit itself. It is so rare to be able to take time to talk and listen and think without having to produce some report at the end. Thanks to all for turning my brain on its side more than a few times over the course of the day.

I would side with 'not the toolkit' and perhaps lean more toward informative readings. Same difference? I go back often to the references I've collected over the years of attending these Summits, and among the most dog eared is the Milward & Provan IBM doc on managing networks. In thinking about my networks, whether organic or mandated, I go back to the beginning – why am I doing this or why are they doing this; what's the objective or purpose? It drives everything.

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I am not keen on the toolkit idea, although in part it may simply be the semantics that are problematic. A few years ago when the idea of a network managers' toolkit arose, it seems to me it was envisioned as a set of selected resources more than as a recipe. In my thinking of the network way of working, a toolkit doesn't fit it if means a formulaic approach. I think we just need a new descriptor that sounds less fixed. It's the organic, intuitive essence of networks that others have touched on which appeals to me.

Many of us go back to favourite resources time and again and, coincidentally, I am just working on a presentation for my network, based on the Milward & Provan IBM report, on management of accountability – management in and of a network. I am using it to (as Milward would say) 'nip at the heels of my network members', encouraging them to help build the network culture by taking up their roles in the network more substantively and influencing their own organizations. As I like to say, in my own network way of working – "resistance is futile." The discourse on the limitations of fixed role identification resonates as well – we seem to be at our best when we acknowledge the wisdom that comes from all of our roles – individually, and, collectively.

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Generally, and from the symposium and summit, there is an increasing need to address not just what should be done, but even more importantly, the how. Until this implementation gap (perceived or real) is closed, the respective expectations of network researchers and practitioners will likely not be well-aligned. Rupert Chisholm (deceased) spoke of the synergy of action

research and network development. I very much agree with and support this approach as it, among other things, engages and respects all stakeholders and their needs, levels the playing field, fosters transformative learning, and enables concerted action, and all this can occur in real-time with course correction on an as-we-go basis. As we know, network development is a 'messy' business. We need to collectively think about this and figure out how to apply such an approach in myriad contexts to demonstrate network effectiveness.

Continuing the Conversation

Over the years, most of us have placed a high value on these Summit opportunities. They have made us better network thinkers and leaders and researchers. Our central and overarching impetus for continuing the Summit conversations is to continue to address and advance accessible knowledge and ideas concerning critical issues facing network research and practice. We look forward to the next one!