

Facilitating Networks - a good practice guide

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Overview

These good practices for facilitating networks draw upon practical experiences that DFID staff captured at two workshops for Network Facilitators held in Feb and March 2004¹. If you are considering setting up a network or wondering how to make yours better, these good practices will prompt you to ask many of the questions you'll need answers too somewhere along the line.

Staff networks have been supporting learning and professional development at DFID for many years. They can be strengthened by recognising and supporting those people who act as facilitators / co-ordinators / leaders of these networks. This Good Practice Guide contributes to that purpose.

Topics Covered:

- Starting-Up a Network
 - Have You Double-Checked Your Reasons for Starting a Network?
 - When Should this Network Become Active?
 - What Type of Network Will Yours Be?
 - What Kind of Facilitation Will Your Network Need?
 - What Kinds of Behaviours and Activities are Appropriate to a Facilitator?
 - What Tools and Channels of Communication can you use for Facilitating a Network?

- How to Involve External Participants in Networks
 - Be Clear What the Network is for before Involving External Participants
 - Who Exactly are the External Participants Going to Be?
 - Who Hosts the Network?

- Sustaining a Network
 - What Resource has the Network Got?
 - What Makes Your Network Valuable to its Members?
 - Reviving a Faltering Network
 - Handing Over the Role of Facilitator
 - What Will Happen When Your Network Has Done its Job?

- Further Good Practice Resources on Network Facilitation

**Please send feedback / comments / lessons / experience to add to this resource to:
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¹ Role Based Networks 3 Feb. 2004, Thematic Networks 23 Mar 2004 (facilitation by Carl Jackson, Kath Pasteur & Maggie Ibrahim from the Institute of Development Studies, UK for Sarah Mathews, DFID)

Good Practices

Starting-Up a Network

Have You Double-Checked Your Reasons for Starting a Network?

Before committing yours and other people's time and money ask yourself:

Purpose

- Will it help your organisation meet its objectives? (e.g. can you say how)
- Can you clarify the aims and purpose?
- Would an alternative approach better meet the purpose? (e.g. a partnership with an existing marketing campaign or training programme, a brainstorming event or a project team)
Networks are not always the answer. They don't suit non-continuous activity – instead need to capture experience and lessons and make in available to the next team tackling the issues – a network won't be sustainable where there are large gaps in time or things are sequential.
- Have you reviewed the external environment, what have the World Bank and others already got running?

Demand

- Have you established sufficient demand for your network as without it the network will struggle? (e.g. will it build on an existing community)

 Lesson: without establishing demand at the outset networks risk floundering, they will need much more work to get established, and risk alienating or annoying prospective participants
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- What are members going to get out of the network?
- Have you considered the incentive structures that will facilitate or hinder network activity? (e.g. can people can get rewarded through their performance appraisal for participating in or facilitating a network)

Resources

- Do you have control of the resources needed to deliver the network?
- Is the effort going to be put in greater or lesser than the actual outputs? (i.e. are you wasting your time in setting the thing up if no one is likely to be interested; can you identify and measure intended benefits) Are there short and long term benefits? Do the inputs justify both sets of benefits?
- Will prospective network participants face barriers to access (e.g. internet bandwidth constraints, location)
- Take the time budget you have in mind and double it, it will take a lot longer than you might think (both to get the network up and running and to meet the objectives you are setting)
- Take the cash budget you have in mind and halve it, the technical inputs you need are standard and getting cheaper all the time
- Make best use of the IT tools already available in your organisation – email, intranet, D-Groups, video conferencing, tele conferencing etc

Buy-in

- Who will buy-in to the collective outcomes of network activity?
- Have you consulted prospective participants and other stakeholders (e.g. at staff retreats, by discussion on the phone, or via email survey)
- Have you asked potential members what they want from a network? Keep in touch with members as networks evolve, meet new needs
- Have you targeted potential Champions like team leaders and senior management to get their buy-in to use of time and resources?

- Will the people you hope to have in your network feel confident sharing opinions or are there pre-existing power differentials at work that would require sub-groups of more equal participants?
- Is the culture right? Successful networks need trust, are people prepared to ask for help and confident to offer it, will responses be valued, is time spent on networking activities viewed as time well spent by managers etc

Staff Appointed in Country

- How will they be included on an equal footing?
- Will the network be responsive to their priorities?
- How will you address barriers to access and participation?

Monitoring

- consider establishing indicators against which to gather evidence of activity in your network (e.g. number of members joining / leaving, web and email traffic statistics, number and type of outputs?)
- consider having a user workshop or survey after six months of activity to obtain qualitative feedback and comments

Format

- Develop a common perception and language for the network
- How will the network communicate? (e.g. face-to-face, using technology - internet, phone, video - or a combination)

 **Lesson:** Keep the format and tools used by the network as simple as possible and appropriate to members. If flashy technology is used for its own sake or complex structures obscure the core messages prospective participants won't tell you, they just won't join in.

How Will You Launch Your Network?

- A good way to establish a network of people in the same location is to physically take them out to interact in a more informal or stimulating environment
- Big splash or evolution
 - don't believe your own PR, be realistic and don't expect it to happen overnight
- Is the launch for the prospective members or for general promotion to the office
 - be clear which, and you'll probably need both (they are quite different)
- A successful launch will generate members – are you ready?

 **Lesson:** be weary of face-to-face events which are London-centric

When Should this Network Become Active?

- Is the timing right?
 - Is it linked to a key influencing opportunity?
 - Look internally and externally for factors which might contribute to the networks success or failure (e.g. are there other public networks already covering this topic – what is the value added from an internal network, is there more value from tapping into these pre-existing networks?)
- Are there conflicting or differing agendas amongst members and interest groups?
 - If so perhaps the timing is wrong or perhaps the purpose needs redefining?

What Type of Network Will Yours Be?

Based on your assessment of demand and outputs / benefits you should ask yourself if your network will primarily be;

- Role based – supporting and enhancing the skills and knowledge of participants in relation to a discrete professional responsibility?
- Output based – supporting joint working on a project or activity with a specific timeframe for deliverables?
- Mutual interest – supporting enthusiasm for exchange of ideas and experience around a topic?

 **Lesson:** size matters – small is better. To allow relationship building and relevance; consider sub-dividing on big network into smaller peer groups

What Kind of Facilitation Will Your Network Need?

The kind of facilitation needed depends a lot on what kind of network you're going to have

- Role based
 - Facilitation will probably be an ongoing need
 - It may be a wide ranging group,
 - People may move in and out of the group at short notice,
 - Technical advice and support may also be needed
- Output based
 - Facilitation will initially be needed
 - To prepare and set out the goals and agreed outputs.
 - To identify interested participants
 - To review progress and identify when the output is achieved – where next? closure or evolution and new objectives?
- Mutual interest
 - Facilitation will initially be needed
 - To clarify the aims of the group.
 - To introduce new members
 - To keep the peace

 **Lesson:** create an environment where the facilitator supports the process, not owns it

Will you need to actively moderate network activity?

- an over-busy network can overload members with information

What Kinds of Behaviours and Activities are Appropriate to a Facilitator?

- Typical behaviours for a facilitator include
 - listening to traffic on the network
 - conciliating differences between members
 - supporting members needs
 - checking that information is understood
 - motivating cooperative behaviour
 - coaching on the topic of the network
 - signalling the availability of resources and opportunities outside the network
- Typical Activities for a Facilitator
 - maintaining members list
 - organising face to face events
 - induction of new members
 - matchmaking between members

- initiating distribution of information
- representing the network in other fora
- managing the network's assets
- networking with members to maintain energy
- promoting the network and its achievements
- maintain motivation for participation by offering relevant incentives
- ensure feeling of inclusion – so members feel part of something

 **Lesson:** new joiners to an organisation often lack the contacts and social networks to facilitate successfully. Would someone else be better placed?

What Tools and Channels of Communication can you use for Facilitating a Network?

There are plenty of options. Ideally you should use more than one tool / channel because different users have different needs and preferences. However, you may have resource constraints and will need to select only the most effective. Options used at DFID include:

- email (one to one and groups)
- intranet pages
- Newsletters
- face-to-face meetings
- video / tele conferences
- web casts
- collaborative workspace tools (e.g. D-Groups)

 **Lesson:** Some of the most successful DFID virtual team spaces were ones that aimed to produce a specific product to meet a deadline (rather than rambling interest groups with no focus or endpoint). It was also clear that you need to timetable this sort of activity ahead of actually doing it so that people you want to contribute can make the time to participate. There are also important issues around everyone you want to contribute being comfortable with the technology you choose to use, having agreement on the format of comments / inputs (using word track changes, re-drafting sections, making comments in emails etc).

What channels would network members prefer?

- Overseas and home worker network members may have different requirements from UK HQ staff
- Feedback from the group on their preferences will help you refine and prioritise your channels
 - People will revert to person to person email or phone unless you are offering something they consider more useful

 **Lesson:** most networks in DFID use multiple channels of communication. For example, the Departmental Prism Liaison Officers (DPLO) network used workshops, newsletters, DVD/Video, Insight pages, and e-mail to share information. Over time, this network refined down the number of channels being used to best suit its purposes.

Have you got the technical skills to manage the channels you've selected?

- summarising
- Drafting
- Writing for the web
- Publishing on Insight
- IT competencies to set up collaborative tools like D-Groups
- Facilitation skills for running face to face events
- Chairing tele and video conferences

How to Involve External Participants in Networks

(especially policy focused networks)

Be Clear What the Network is for before Involving External Participants

- Does your organisation as network 'convenor' actually want external input?
 - Need to clarify this before you start and why you want / need external participants
 - Is the purpose to influence these participants, get them to influence policy, to mutually share knowledge or advocate for certain types of change?
- Do you know why external participants would want to be involved (incentives)?
 - Look out for where incentives seem to be diverging
 - Map out what is already out there
- Beware facipulation
 - manipulation of your external participants under the guise of facilitation
- When will you invite external participants to join in?
 - practically it is hard to invite external partners into pre-existing internal networks, so maybe better to get them involved from the outset

Who Exactly Are the External Participants Going to Be?

- Who should be involved or is it just an old boys' network?
 - Are you really open or closed?
- Who will you exclude?
 - Make sure you have credible criteria to hand
- How will you maintain linkages with external institutions where representatives have been nominated to your network but may move on
- How will you clarify expectations of internal and external participants?

Who Hosts the Network?

- Is the host organisation seen as neutral?
 - If not trust may be much slower to build
- Is there some kind of steering group?
 - If this can bridge different interest groups it can add credibility
- Are there sufficient resources to make it work?
 - An external host may not have as much capacity as you think

Sustaining a Network

What Resource has the Network Got?

Are you making the most of the resources associated with your network?

- Facilitators' time
 - are you working on priorities for the network or those things you feel more motivated by?
 - is time allocated to facilitation in work plan and Personal Development Plan (PDP)?
- Participants' time
 - are you minimising the time cost of participating in the network? (e.g. clearly indicating the relevance of a document circulated in the network can save hours of time for participants who would otherwise have read to the end to find out its real conclusions)
 - have participants registered their membership in their PDPs so line managers recognise time spent on networks and can monitor value from them?
- Network Budget
 - are you making the right investments? (e.g. a get together to re-kindle trust and understanding between longstanding members could be as useful as a new website promoting the existence of the network)
- Political Capital
 - are you keeping your champions informed of your progress? (e.g. the commitment you may need from management in the future could have gone cold if you miss opportunities for sharing your successes)
 - are you letting other stakeholders know about your network's success to create a positive buzz?

What Makes Your Network Valuable to its Members?

It is only valuable if you achieve something from participation in the network.

- Offer practical learning events to members
- Stay on track, and don't be hi-jacked by others who want to use your network and its members to communicate their message or do their work

Manage users' expectations

- Don't make promises that you cannot keep (e.g. together we'll bring about policy change)
- Keep the promises you do make
 - but don't be afraid to scale them back if you admit they were unrealistic

 **Lesson:** to keep your commitments to produce monthly newsletters (or whatever), think about the pipeline - where is the content coming from, is there time to edit and publish it and maintain quality?

Share clear Terms of Reference

- Say clearly and briefly what the network is there to do
- Be flexible enough to change TORs
- Set out the benefits and outcomes of membership
- Establish etiquette for participation

Make the best use of informal and existing networks

- Celebrate the informal/spontaneous nature of networks

Enable Participants to Get the Most from Each Other?

- Peer to peer relationships within the network may be its biggest asset. A directory of information on participants, a Yellow Pages, can enable relationships to start up spontaneously. Active match making between people you see with similar interests also works.

Appreciate the value that individuals bring to the network

- use your position as facilitator to highlight valuable contributions by name
- Keep flexible, encourage and respond to individual feedback
 - be open to change about formats, products etc
- welcome new members and thank leavers for their participation
- engaging with all staff on equal footing

Invest resource in inducting new members into an existing network

- share rules of participation and examples of past activity
- get to know them and introduce them to a some existing members
- expect that new and existing members interests will diverge to begin with

Balance needs of different members as the network grows

- you may need to differentiate between key and secondary stakeholders to inform decisions about where to direct the energies of the facilitator

Use email effectively when communicating with the network

- Follow the email code of conduct
 - don't contribute to email overload
 - agree a standard subject heading for messages so that members can auto route emails to specific folders
- Share the group's email addresses with all members to enable communication within the group

Develop a shared workspace for the Network to make working documents and other Network resources more easily available

- if you develop an inSight page, have you identified a DCM to maintain it?

Reviving a Faltering Network

This is a very common predicament – using the questions in the starting up a network section will help re-focus the network and may help identify gaps and areas where attention is needed

- Be honest about the networks status – ask members for help or suggestions – do they want the network to continue – why – in what format etc.
- Kick start it again with a specific event (make sure you are ready to maintain it again – don't put all your effort into the re-launch)
- What are the incentives for active participation in your network – can you boost these to make it more appealing
- Consolidate, document and acknowledge what the network has already achieved and then set a new agenda based on current members interests

Handing Over the Role of Facilitator

This is often a critical moment in terms of a networks' survival – too many networks fail when the initial facilitator moves on – prepare for this from the start – organisation's staff can be very mobile and very often will not take the facilitation of a network with them to a new post

- Consider joint facilitation during a handover period to the new facilitator
- Maintain links with the previous facilitator (they may well stay on as an ordinary member)
- Consider rotating the role of facilitator within the network so that capacity is built in the group

 **Lesson:** If facilitation is rotated be clear about the facilitation tasks that individuals are fulfilling so things don't fall through the gaps

What Will Happen When Your Network Has Done its Job?

Keeping the network running when it has achieved all it can may be counterproductive

- plan to end well and celebrate the network's achievements
 - ending your network on a bad note will make it harder for you or others to start up new ones
- consider investing in gathering together lessons and valuable outputs and package them so they can be handed over to a library or online knowledge base

Further Good Practice Resource on Network Facilitation

Here are some good places to explore further issues in Network Facilitation

- Creating Discussion Areas - an Eldis / GDNNet Guide to advice, tools and examples for managing successful discussion groups
 - <http://www.eldis.org/tales/discuss/index.htm>
- Building Online Communities - an iTrain Online module
 - <http://www.itrainonline.org/itrainonline/english/communication.shtml>

Please send feedback / comments / lessons / experience to add to this resource to: s-mathews@dfid.gov.uk