

# Networks at Play

## Practicing Organizational Communication

By Maya Townsend, 2011 Pfeiffer Consulting Annual

### Activity Summary

A short experiential activity that introduces participants to the concepts of hidden social networks and of critical connectors.

### Goals

- To gain a concrete experience with social networks in a short period of time that lays the foundation for discussion of key concepts
- To identify qualities of hidden organizational networks
- To illustrate how two types of critical connectors—hubs and gatekeepers—function in hidden networks

### Group Size

Minimum of 10 people. Maximum has not yet been reached. The activity has been done successfully with 150+ people.

### Time Required

30 minutes maximum.

### Materials

- Flipchart (for variation only)
- Markers (for variation only)

### Physical Setting

A room large enough for people to move freely without being hindered by chairs, tables, or other obstacles. As group size increases, room size requirements increase as well. For small groups, the activity can be completed in a 20' x 20' area.

### Facilitating Risk Rating

Low

## Process

### Introduction

1. Introduce the concept of networks and the activity:

*Organization charts identify leaders, departments, and reporting relationships. Process maps show the flow of work across departments and divisions. But despite our best efforts to document how work happens in organizations, there are still fundamental gaps in our understanding.*

*Underneath the organization charts and process maps is a hidden web of relationships that people use to improve processes, solve problems, and complete work. All employees are connected through relationship networks. However, most people have little insight into the shape and influence of their networks. Furthermore, leaders are often blind to how informal relationships influence organizational performance and productivity.*

*In this activity, we will gain a concrete experience with a network in order to understand typical network dynamics. We will learn about critical connectors: roles that occur organically in all networks and that have disproportionate influence on the system as a whole.*

### Part 1: A Simple Network

Part I demonstrates the unexpected effects that individual actions can have in a simple network.

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1. Gather people in a circle.
2. Ask several people to serve as observers. Their role will be to stand outside the group and observe what happens.
3. Ask participants to pick 2 people in the group who will act as their “targets” for the exercise. They should not reveal their choices to anyone.
4. Explain the guidelines for the activity:
  - The goal is stay equidistant from both targets at all times. Participants will need to move around the room in order to accomplish this.
  - Participants can be close to or far from the targets as they wish as long as they are equidistant from both.
  - The activity continues until the facilitator says STOP.
5. Demonstrate what it means to be equidistant by moving between two individuals. Ask one of the two individuals to move a few feet in any direction. Then demonstrate how to adjust in order remain equidistant from the first person.
6. Start the activity. Allow people to move and shift for no more than 5 minutes. Often, 3 minutes is enough to get a sense of the system dynamics.
7. Call **STOP**. Ask participants to stop in place and turn to face the facilitator.
8. Debrief the activity. Potential debrief questions include:
  - What did you experience during the exercise?
  - *Observers*: What did you notice as you watched this group in motion?
  - What qualities does this network possess?
9. Explain typical network qualities which, according to Plastrik & Taylor (2005), include:
  - *Rapid Growth*: Networks can grow quickly because members benefit from adding connections.
  - *Rapid Diffusion*: Networks diffuse information quickly.
  - *The Six Degrees Phenomenon*: Networks connect diverse people quickly and easily.
  - *Resiliency*: Healthy networks can withstand stress because they can quickly reorganize without significantly affecting productivity.
  - *Adaptability*: Networks can adapt quickly to change.
10. Ask participants how the experience they have just had in this group relates to the workplace. Generally, participants comment on how their work is dependent on decision makers who act without understanding their impact on others. Likewise, there are people, who may be unknown to participants, which depend on them for information.

### **Part 2: A Network Hub**

Part 2 demonstrates the power of a hub.

1. Use the same observers and guidelines as in Part 1 (Steps #2 and #4).
2. Ask the entire group to use a specific person that you name as their first target. This person will serve as the hub. Ask the group to select a second target of their choice.
3. Start the activity.



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4. At some point during the activity, ask the hub to move very quickly across the room. Observe what happens.
5. Ask the hub to stand absolutely still and observe what happens.
6. Debrief the activity. Possible debrief questions include:
  - How was this experience different from the first?
  - *Question for the Hub:* How was your experience different from the first round?
  - How does the experience in this group relate to the workplace?
7. Explain the concept of the Hub:

*The concept of the hub was developed by Dr. Karen Stephenson, who has spent 30 years researching networks and applying network science to organizations. Hubs are directly connected to many people. They're the social butterflies of the company. They tend to know everyone and multitask effectively. They're compulsive communicators; tell something to a hub, and soon the entire organization will know about it.*

8. Ask participants how Hubs show up in their companies:
  - How do Hubs influence work in your company?
  - How do they help?
  - How do they hinder?

### **Part 3: A Network Gatekeeper**

Part 3 demonstrates the role of a gatekeeper.

1. Use the same observers as in Part 1 (Step #2).

2. Use the same guidelines as in Part 1 (Step #4) with one exception: Ask a third of the group to use a specific person that you name as their one and only target. This person is the gatekeeper. Ask the rest of the group to select two targets of their choice.
3. Start the activity.
4. At some point during the activity, ask the gatekeeper to move very quickly across the room. Observe what happens.
5. Ask all motion to STOP. Then ask the gatekeeper to remove him or herself from the activity and stand on the side of the room. Ask participants to RESUME activity. Observe what happens. If participants ask who they should use as a target, simply reiterate the instruction to resume activity.
6. Debrief the activity. Possible debrief questions include:
  - How was this experience different from the previous rounds?
  - *Question for the Gatekeeper:* How was your experience different from the previous rounds?
  - *Question for People Linked to the Gatekeeper:* How was your experience different from the previous rounds?
7. Explain the concept of a Gatekeeper:

*Gatekeepers hold the keys to specific parts of an organization and groups of people. They must be accessed in order to receive certain information. Gatekeepers can be intense obstacles to change or tremendous supporters.*

8. Ask participants how Gatekeepers show up in their companies:
  - How do Gatekeepers influence work in your company?

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- How do they help?
- How do they hinder?

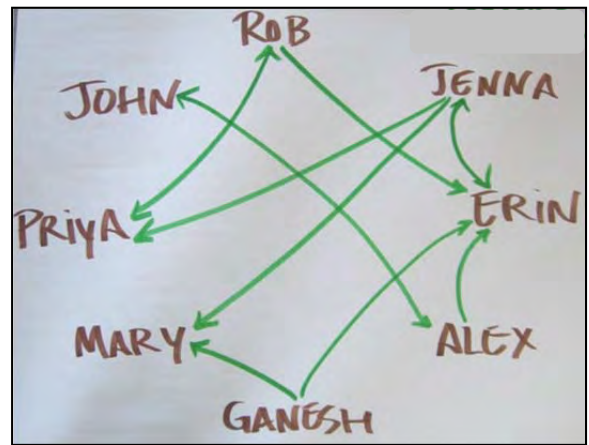
### Final Processing Discussion

1. Explain how networks relate to the workplace:
  - Information flow, knowledge dissemination, problem-solving, strategizing, and innovating all occur through networks of interactions.
  - Overly dense networks can indicate bureaucracy. Overly sparse networks can indicate silos.
  - Critical connectors, such as hubs and gatekeepers, act as culture shapers. They are disproportionately responsible for influencing activity within the network (Stephenson, 1999). By leveraging critical connectors effectively and alleviating bottlenecks, organizations can accelerate change implementation, improve knowledge sharing, and increase productivity.
  - Networks are correlated to project success. One study found that 93% of completely successful change initiatives were led by people with very strong / strong personal networks (Townsend & Yeung, 2009).
  - High performers are more likely to build high-quality relationships; invest in relationships that extend expertise, balance biases, and prevent career traps; and position selves at key network points and leverage people around them (Cross & Thomas, & Light, 2008).
2. Ask participants:
  - How might the concepts of networks help you on the job?
  - How might you use networks to help make your next project a success?
  - How might you use Hubs and Gatekeepers?

### Variation

#### Part I Variation – For Smaller Groups Only

1. Map the activity. On the flipchart, write down the first name or initials of each participant. Then ask participants to reveal their targets. As they do, draw lines to show connections. As an alternative, ask participants to draw lines from their name to their targets (see example).



2. Debrief observations on the network map. Potential debrief questions include:
  - What do you notice about this map?
  - *Question for a Hub:* It looks as if you had a lot of people connected to you. Did you sense that as you were participating in the activity? What was your experience like during the activity? How does this remind you of—or feel different from—your experience in the workplace?
  - *Question for someone with few or no connections:* No one else connected to you during the activity. Did you sense that as you were participating? What was your experience like? How does this remind you of—or feel different from—your experience in the workplace?

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NOTE: People who haven't been chosen as targets by other participants often feel initially left out or alienated. This is a good time to talk about how unconnected people are often hidden innovators in organizations: people who are quietly finding new and better ways to get things done. They also might be new to the organization, in a new role, or in a position that requires interactions with people other than those in the group.

### Note

The inspiration for this exercise was drawn from Linda Booth Sweeney's "Triangles" exercise, which was featured in *The Systems Thinking Playbook* (see References).

### References

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### About the Author

Maya Townsend, founder of Partnering Resources, builds aligned, focused organizations that achieve their goals more effectively. She specializes in helping leaders identify the hidden web of relationships that drive performance and reach across the white spaces to develop solutions that stick. Her articles have been published in *Chief Learning Officer*, *CIO.Com*, *Mass High Tech*, and other industry publications and she serves on the Editorial Review Board for *OD Practitioner*.

