

People Problems? Keep Your Human Network Running!

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Every leader can agree that it's essential to keep the network up. If it goes down, then so does the business.

Similarly, every successful leader is responsible for a human network. In this article, we'll look at how leaders can keep their essential human networks up and running.

The Human Network

Every organization consists of multiple, enmeshed, complex, and constantly evolving webs of relationships that people activate in order to solve problems, gain expertise, make decisions, and discover the next "big thing." Just as "junk in" leads to "junk out" in databases, the wrong connections or wrong inputs (incorrect information, faulty assumptions, inadequate understanding, or miscommunications) can damage an organization's reputation, relationships, and deliverables. If teams aren't sharing the right information or if staffers don't have the expertise to do their work properly, they can hurt project success rates, client satisfaction, and virtually anything else an organization provides.

Studies in network behavior—conducted over 30+ years by experts such as corporate anthropologist [Dr. Karen Stephenson](#)—confirm that human networks can suffer from the same vulnerabilities as other networks, such as single points of failure (SPOFs) and weak links. Remedies for human networks include:

- Single points of failure: Protect against SPOFs by building redundancies into system. Make sure there are multiple people who hold critical organizational and process knowledge, and who can fulfill mission-critical roles, make decisions on the fly, and solve problems.

- Weak links: Shore up weak links. If any transaction relies on only one person, it's at risk. Just like any other network, a human network needs backups in case of failure.

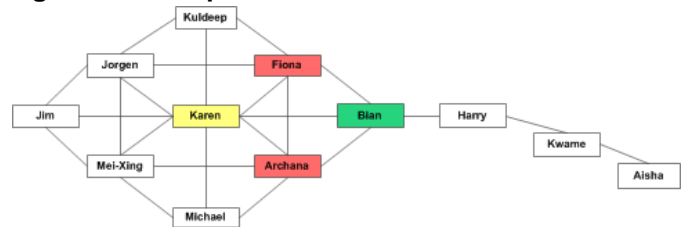
However, the science of networks also provides an invaluable additional tool for managing human networks: critical connectors. These three "power roles" have immense influence within a network although people often don't know they exist. The three power roles are hubs, gatekeepers, and pulsetakers.

The Three Power Roles in the Human Network

Hubs are directly connected to many people. Information comes in from multiple sources to the hub, and he or she shares it with many. Hubs communicate constantly: tell something to a hub, and soon the entire organization will know about it.

In Figure 2, Karen (the yellow square) is a hub. Despite having no direct reports (the managers in this organization are Kuldeep, Jorgen, and Bian), she has more connections than anyone else. She links directly to eight people: Jim, Jorgen, Kuldeep, Fiona, Archana, Michael, Mei-Xing, and Harry.

Figure 2. A simple human network



Hubs like Karen are invaluable in organizations. Leaders can use them to spread the word quickly about an important event, new process, change in strategy, or procedure. This is important. Most leaders think that if they've talked about the

message at an all-hands meeting and posted it on the intranet, that's sufficient. However, with all of the data people receive (which, according to the [University of California at San Diego](https://www.scribd.com/document/37111111/University-of-California-at-San-Diego), is 33.79 gigabytes per person per day), critical information often gets lost in the shuffle. Sending information through hubs helps make the message stick since people trust hubs and tend to remember what they have to say. Using hubs will help leaders ensure that critical information doesn't get lost.

However, hubs also embody risk. If your hub retires or goes on vacation, communication and information flow can grind to a halt. That's why it's important for leaders to identify hubs and build redundancy into their organizations. With redundancy, if a hub hits the lottery and retires to Bali, customers don't suffer from the loss of the hub's knowledge.

Another challenge, of course, occurs when hubs are bitter. If they start talking critically about the organization, that message will be heard and valued by their peers. To prevent hubs from feeding the rumor mill in the wrong way, wise leaders keep them close: check in with them, listen to their concerns, and make sure that they feel appreciated.

Gatekeepers hold the keys to specific areas of an organization, groups of people, and bodies of knowledge. In Figure 2, Bian (the green square) is a gatekeeper. Harry, Kwame, and Aisha all work through Bian to access the knowledge they need from the rest of the organization. If Bian were to go away, these three individuals would be completely cut off from everyone else.

Gatekeepers like Bian must be accessed in order to send or receive certain information and they must allow the request to reach its destination. Gatekeepers can be intense obstacles or tremendous supporters. They are critically important to leaders because they:

- Coordinate speedy passage of needed information;
- Approve access to certain people and data;
- Broker relationships between parts of the organization;

- Engage people past the "gate" in change; and
- Can block an organization change, strategy, or project simply by refusing to allow access or transmit information.

Leaders should monitor gatekeepers to make sure they're aligned with the mission and strategic goals of the organization. If not, work needs to occur—quickly—to mitigate the consequences of unaligned activity.

Pulsetakers are the most covert of the three roles. Their claim to fame is that they are indirectly connected to many people in the organization. The best way to describe the power of their role is by using the six degrees of separation example. If average people take six steps to reach a connection, pulsetakers take only two or three.

In Figure 2, Fiona and Archana (the red squares) are pulsetakers. They don't have the most connections – only 5 each – but they have a shortest distance to travel in order to access any other person. They may not connect with *many* people, but they connect with the *right* people. Pulsetakers have their fingers on the pulse of the organization and, without much effort, they can tell you what's really happening in the company.

Leaders can use pulsetakers to:

- Get the word out quickly and quietly about what's going on;
- Learn how people are feeling about the new change effort;
- Access people who know the right people; and
- Get the real status on a strategy, project, or initiative.

Human Network Opportunities

Often, leaders are not aware of the hidden subject matter experts and high performers buried in their organizations. Too often they become aware of these people only after they leave.

Hidden Subject Matter Experts. Network mapping uncovers the trusted experts in the organization: the people who, quietly and unobtrusively, are trusted



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by their colleagues to have the best and latest information about a customer, product line, or organizational process. These are the people that, when laid off, can hurt an organization just through their absence.

In one such example, a software company let go of a low-level administrator citing the need to reduce overhead in the organization. Little did they know that this woman was single-handedly responsible for securing millions of dollars each year by nagging companies until they finally sent in sponsorship checks for the annual trade conference. Once she left, the leaders realized their error, but the damage was already done. Her expertise about the sponsors, and how best to influence them, left with her.

High Performers. Leaders think they can identify their high performers. However, they're not always right.

One company's leadership team identified the 30 individuals they thought would be highly connected. Then, after a network analysis, they matched their list to the results. Only five people from the initial list were actual critical connectors. It turned out that the other 25 on the initial list were only one or two steps away from the leaders: direct contacts or contacts of direct contacts. But, since the leaders' personal networks were limited (as everyone's are), they couldn't see the connectors outside their personal networks.

It was a wake-up call. The leadership team rethought their talent development strategies and created special plans to leverage the actual key connectors.

Performance Webs. Another error that organizations often make is that they don't consider how individuals' networks influence their ability to deliver. After a merger, two organizations looked at their staff to identify who they wanted to make sure to keep. One star performer was quickly named. However, the organization almost sandbagged him by proposing to release key members of his network: people who didn't show up as stars

themselves, but helped the star perform. Luckily, the star and his support network were retained so there was no interruption in service quality.

Leaders often ask: can I hire for critical connectors? Can I find a replacement for a pulsetaker who's leaving? The answer is no.

Hubs, gatekeepers, and pulsetakers emerge in networks due to multiple, complex factors that can't be predicted. Some of these factors have to do with roles: project managers will naturally interact with more people than coders simply due to the nature of the work. Other factors have to do with individuals and their personal integrity, reliability, trustworthiness, and desire to share information. The most important factors have to do with the *other* people in the organization: if they don't trust and accept someone, that person cannot become a critical connector. Since IT leaders can't hire critical connectors, they must monitor, maintain, and fine tune what they have in order to keep human networks up and running.

Optimizing Your Human Network

Human networks are embedded in every organization. To leverage this powerful, already existing asset within your organization:

1. **Learn about networks.** No one would charge a newly graduated high school student with the important job of documenting a Fortune 500 mission-critical workflow. Similarly, some learning is needed before an organization can dive in to human network mapping. Free learning resources are available online and public workshops are available.
2. **Map the network.** The next step is to map the network: identify the flows of information to and from nodes within the organization (and, if a leader is ambitious, to and from customers) and then depict them visually. The best way to gather data about information flow is through survey-based data collection. Again, there are many resources to help with this mapping (see [InFlow](#), [NetForm](#), [NetMiner](#), or [UCINET](#) for starters). (Some companies sponsor interesting network analyses based on email traffic, but we



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don't recommend this approach since it only gets at superficial exchanges, not the important strategic, improvement, and innovation conversations that are so critical to an organization.)

3. **Analyze the network.** This is where many organizations thrive. We've covered some of the things to look for in the network: single points of failure, weak links, hubs, gatekeepers, pulsetakers, structural over-dependency, missing links, unaligned links, too many links, and orphans. Analysis helps Leaders identify and correct these risks. This is also the time to build redundancy into the system, mitigate potential risks, and act on opportunities.
4. **Engage people in power roles.** Because people in power roles—hubs, gatekeepers, and pulsetakers—have such influence in the human network, it's smart to keep them close. A good practice is to convene these people for a monthly breakfast meeting with organizational leaders. That's a good time for critical connectors to ask their questions, get straight answers, and for leaders to ensure that they're getting the right information about the direction of the company. Other good practices include placing critical connectors on advisory boards and cross-functional teams.
5. **Evolve the human network over time.** Human networks evolve constantly and, indeed, they should. A human network that operates the same way it did 10 years ago would be hopelessly out of touch with the needs and demands of its customer base.

One final tip: If leaders have organization performance dashboards, they can also have human network dashboards. Savvy leaders keep a human network dashboard that includes a list of hubs, gatekeepers, and pulsetakers; a plan for retaining critical connectors; and a list of red flags. They keep it in a locked drawer—no dashboard updates at town hall meetings—but they look at it every day to make sure they're keeping their human network up and running.

Authors' Bios

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