Nonprofit Network Analysis

What are networks?
Networks are hidden webs of relationships that people use to get work done. Some inter-organizational coalitions and volunteer groups are specifically called networks. However, everyone associated with an organization, including staff, boards, volunteers, donors, and constituents, is connected through informal, invisible networks.

Since nonprofits depend on support and resources from donors, governmental agencies, volunteers, and the community, their networks are critically important. Network quality, shape, and strength affect how well nonprofits affect change. A nonprofit with effective networks will be more successful raising money, influencing policy, building capacity, and influencing change than those with weak or broken networks.

What types of questions can be answered by a network analysis?
A network analysis can address many types of focal questions. Most studies have 2 – 4 focal questions. Examples of focal questions include:
- How well does information flow between staff, board, and volunteer leaders? How are decisions made?
- How well is the organization drawing on the diversity of its people? What patterns may be inhibiting full participation and contributions by all members?
- What areas are overburdened in the organization? What areas are understaffed?
- How well are people working together across site, program, and organizational lines? Where are opportunities for improvement?
- What processes and routine decisions waste time and could be revised in order to reduce inefficiency?
- Who are organization's informal leaders? How well has the organization shared leadership? Is the organization overly dependent on a few to lead the whole?
- How do coalition members work together? Who interacts with whom? How closely do these interaction patterns match formal roles and hierarchies? How can coalition members improve the way they collaborate in order to affect change?
- How well do 2 – 3 partner organizations share resources, solve problems, and draw on each other for assistance?
- What kinds of interactions and transactions define a strong relationship between partner organizations? How can nonprofits replicate these interactions and transactions to improve the organizations' ability to collaborate effectively?

What are the requirements for a successful study?
- Identifiable, bounded study population
- Clear communication with study participants about why the organization is initiating a study and what the organization hopes to gain through the process
- A list of study participants' names and email addresses
- A high response rate – as close to 100% as possible
- Leaders who are committed to the success of the analysis and who are willing to encourage people to complete the survey

What is an "identifiable, bounded study population?"
For an initial study, the scope should be limited to an easily identifiable, bounded population. *Potential board members* is a population that is not easily identifiable since we can't name all the people interested in the topic. In addition, the pool of potential board members is not easily bounded. It could

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include people from various industries, ages, work backgrounds, and experiences with the organization.

An *organization's staff* is an example of a population that's easily identifiable and bounded. We can name the people who are on the organization's payroll. There may be some minor boundary issues—do the people who volunteer time working as staff count?—but these are easily resolved. Other examples of easily identifiable, bounded populations include:

- Current and past board members
- Coalition leadership
- Department staff
- Fundraising team
- Program committee
- Partner organizations

How is data gathered?
The data is gathered through a short online survey sent directly to study participants. The survey asks questions—chosen for the particular study—about whom members reach out to in order to:

- Complete basic work
- Gain information
- Solve problems
- Come up with new ideas
- Strategize
- Make decisions

The survey also gathers specific background information about members. For example, an organization interested in how well established staff share information with newly hired staff will ask questions about length of service. Length of service data is correlated with network patterns to analyze how well information flows between differences in tenure. Examples of other background information sought by organizations are:

- Demographic characteristics in order to identify how diversity influences who interacts with whom and for what purpose
- Areas of expertise in order to identify which areas are understaffed
- Staff location in order to understand how well people are working across sites
- Routine decisions and processes that are time wasters and that could be revised in order to reduce bureaucracy and inefficiency.
- Teams or departments in which more collaboration is desired
- People who individuals wish they could access more frequently or easily

What does the organization receive as a result of participation?
Network analysis produces maps that show decision making, problem solving, and strategizing patterns. They also answer the study's specific focal questions. Depending on the study, a written analysis, presentation of maps, and/or other reports may be included. All analyses include an independent analysis by the practitioner and a collective analysis with the study sponsors.

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