

Systems Change Network

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Abstract

This is an excerpt from *Connect > Innovate > Scale Up: How Networks Create Systems Change*. In the book, this material follows chapters on Targeting Systems, Developing Social Innovations, Taking Pathways to Scale, and Designing Networks of Networks. To illustrate and deepen the practical frameworks of those chapters, the stories of more than 20 social innovation networks are presented. In this excerpt, leaders of some of those networks reflect on the nature of their leadership: the roles they play and the imperative to keep learning.

The excerpt identifies four distinct leadership roles: Innovation Broker, Network Weaver, Trusted Strategist, and Story Teller. Each role describes specific tasks and approaches. In addition, it explains why and how leaders continue learning how to guide and support social innovation networks.

The Introduction and Chapter 1 of *Connect > Innovate > Scale Up* can be downloaded at the coauthors' [website](#). The authors previously wrote about building networks for social impact in *Connecting to Change the World: Harnessing the Power of Networks for Social Impact*.

Leading Social Innovation Networks

A critical aspect of social innovation network leadership is recognizing that leaders play several key roles in shaping the network's structures, practices, and culture. By *leaders*, we mean founders, members, managers, and investors who step up to guide the network.

From our conversations and collaborations with network leaders and our scan of what experts say, we identified four distinct roles for leadership of social innovation networks:

- Innovation Broker
- Community Weaver
- Trusted Strategist
- Story Teller

Playing each of these roles effectively depends, not surprisingly, on establishing the basic glue of networks: strong relationships among people so they can collaborate successfully. “You can’t do it without building trust,” says Maggie Ullman, cofounder of the Southeast Sustainability Directors Network and a consultant for many social-change networks.

Few network leaders are fully experienced in or otherwise prepared for every aspect of these different roles. For most, leading has involved learning on the job and, often, adapting their approach. As Jennifer Tescher puts it after 18 years of leading the Financial Health Network: “The world changes. Our purpose evolves. The funders are fickle. The pace is relentless. If I weren’t someone who’s extremely comfortable with change, we would be dead by now.”

Innovation Broker

Leaders of social innovation networks serve as brokers of innovations, not as masterminds. It’s an organizing role neatly summed up by Leslie Crutchfield, author of *How Change Happens*, who says that change leaders “enable the parts of the system around them to succeed, rather than trying to shore up resources and do all the work themselves—and soak up the credit, media limelight, or other valuable assets.”¹

Brokers put into place best practices for innovation development. As enablers, brokers hold high standards for the network’s innovation processes and outputs. They help implement the practices that ensure that networks capture good ideas that arise, keep ideas alive in the face of resistance or disinterest, and put promising ideas to the test. They build the members’ trust in the processes. “For a process to work effectively,” note scholars Joanna Cea and Jess Rimington, “it requires a mindset among participants that the process is to be trusted and that it is worth the effort—even if it means pushing one’s comfort limits.”²

Brokers also manage potential pitfalls of innovation processes. Cea and Rimington offer an example: “Prototyping too often can cause creative decision fatigue among participants, ask too much of people’s time, or stymie an intuitive flow of work.”³ Because innovation prototyping can result in outright failure or the need for numerous revisions, networks have to learn to get comfortable with prototyping.

Brokers help networks develop a culture of innovation. They support the formulation of shared rules, behaviors, and experiences for network members, investors, and partners and the overall culture of the network. “Culture,” notes Andrew Hargadon in *How Breakthroughs Happen*, “has a profound effect on innovation via the value it places on tradition versus change, the stigma that is associated with ignorance and failure, the role of competition versus collaboration, and the value placed on invention versus using old ideas.”⁴

Supporting experiments is a crucial part of culture-making. “I don’t want to waste money,” says Jeff Yost, CEO of the Nebraska Community Foundation, “but I’m happy to spend money on

experiments. That's how we learn. Some should fail, or we're not thinking expansively enough. You're constantly in the process of not letting conventional wisdom eat you up."

Another culture-building effort focuses on the network's diversity—a key to supporting the creativity that innovation processes need: "You can have all the beer-busts, staff meetings, communities-of-practice leaders, intranets, knowledge data-bases, and free sodas you can afford," Hargadon says, "but if the variety of experiences isn't there, all these management techniques won't make people creative."⁵

Brokers foster "possibility thinking," creating spaces where network participants challenge assumptions, reframe issues, question, and brainstorm. They also encourage the discovery of relevant ideas outside of the network. You have to avoid creating a "not invented here" culture, notes Hargadon.

Another element of an innovation network's culture: brokers have to acknowledge mistakes and turn failures into lessons learned. Mistakes are nothing to be ashamed of.

Brokers protect innovators from resistance and interference. They have to clear the path for innovators. "There are times you need to go for it," explains Tescher. "To build the Attune innovation, we put it on an island. People knew what was going on and we got internal buy-in. But we walled off things during the product development process. If I had put it into the organizational mix entirely, we'd still be building it."

Brokers protect new ideas by exploring their potential value *before* subjecting them to critical debate. "As new ideas arise," says Norma Camacho, former CEO of Valley Water in California, in a leadership report by the US Water Alliance, "we have to stop focusing on the things that will kill it, why it's not good. Create a culture open to brainstorming before you start talking about the pros and cons."⁶

Brokers insist on disciplined innovation development and improving the network's innovation processes. They demand that innovations show results before pushing them to scale. Their mantra could well be: invent, field test, scale, and then continuously improve.

They debrief the innovation process "to solidify emerging knowledge and spell out implications for future innovation efforts," report Christian Seelos and Johanna Mair in "When Innovation Goes Wrong." They ask probing questions: "Which pathologies occurred during your innovation process? [...] Which assumptions turned out to be faulty enough to require a thorough redesign of your project? [...] What are you learning about the resource requirements for successful scaling?"⁷

Organizing quick feedback loops is a critical part of the improvement process. "Market and systems change take a long time," notes Tescher. "If you wait years for the feedback loop to deliver, it's too late." But, she adds, a continuous stream of feedback can be challenging to

manage. “To be constantly tweaking [an innovation] is an impossible task for a lot of people. It creates a level of instability for staff that doesn’t feel good.”

Network Weaver

All networks live or die based on connectivity: the links among members and relations with partners, stakeholders, and other entities at the network’s periphery. After members and others connect, they can align around ideas and opportunities and collaborate on innovations and other outputs.

Some connecting occurs naturally. People meet, talk, hang out, get to know each other, and decide to stay in touch and work together. But that’s not enough connectivity for building and sustaining an innovation network seeking impact. Sooner or later, it matters to bring new people into the collective or community but connecting with them won’t happen automatically. That’s where weaving comes in.

Weaving is the art of introducing people to each other in ways that stick. Relationships stick when there is trust between the participants. There’s more to weaving than hosting. Weavers serve as the “on-the-ground eyes and ears” of the network, picking up information as they connect with people. They help network members develop new knowledge and skills that allow them to connect more easily. They model an approach to relationships that is positive, appreciative, and focused on strengths and gifts. They encourage people to listen deeply to each other and practice reciprocity, exchanging information, resources, and advice for mutual benefit.

Sisi Wei of the OpenNews network notes in a blog that “organizing conversations are about listening to people, identifying what they care about, presenting a vision of what is possible, and moving people to action.” She adds: “It’s a two-way street. The relational 1-1 includes me, too, and many times I give my own answers to the questions I’m asking, share my experiences, and talk about all the things that resonate with me.”⁸

Weavers face challenges specific to being in an *innovation* network. They are not just trying to connect people. Instead, they are connecting people to develop innovations. This requires collective alignment and collaborative production of outputs, for which linking is just a first step.

The network’s morphing from a tight collective to a large community means that network membership and participation grow and change over time. Gaining many new and diverse members can overwhelm a network unless new and old participants connect well. In some cases, this disruption is what network leaders are looking for. For instance, we previously discussed how the US Water Alliance is expanding membership and participation to include community-based groups, environmentalists, and other entities that are not water utilities. The inclusion effort depends on trust, says OJ McFoy, the Alliance board vice president. As he noted: “The rebuilding of the Alliance that was performed over the last few years will be integral for the Alliance continuing to have the trust of community organizations and philanthropic

organizations and the water utilities. If that continues, we will be able to make some great changes going forward.”

In other cases, an influx of players can stall the network’s momentum as newcomers and veterans try to develop their relationships and alignment so they can work well together. Many of these people may come from different small worlds, with their own mental models about the targeted system, experiences of innovation and change, expectations, values, skills, and practices for collaboration. These differences pose a trust-and relationship-building challenge when identifying and cultivating common ground.

Weavers never stop weaving. The bottom line for network building: weaving and trust building never ends in a network. “I always have our community’s well-being in mind,” says Bill Guest, co-founder and facilitator of the Talent Innovation Network of West Michigan. “To be a part of what we are doing together, it feels really good. We have good people who together are getting something done.”

Weavers attend to the diversity of ideas and experiences in the network. “Diverse perspectives—including strong representation of voices that are often excluded or silenced—are needed to generate innovative insights,” note Cea and Rimington. But, they add, “heterogeneity leads to better outcomes only when it is thoughtfully engaged.”⁹

Diversity doesn’t usually emerge naturally in a network, since like attracts like. It has to be intentionally woven into the network by engaging with people with different backgrounds and points of view. But engaging diverse people so they can become collaborators requires facilitation processes to help them find shared language and common ground.

Weavers also feed a network’s diversity through its range of activities, not just the variety of its membership. “Which colleagues we talk to, which events we notice, which articles we read, which phone calls we return, and countless other daily activities all shape how we think,” notes Hargadon. “Breakthrough innovations require seeing many of those same things but thinking about them differently.”¹⁰

Weavers look outside the network core, not just inside. An innovation network’s weaving work goes beyond its internal community of members. As a network matures and turns to scale up innovations, it may need to build relationships with stakeholders and other individuals and entities who can be partners for scaling. A weaver’s outside work may start long before that—establishing relationships that can be tapped down the road when needed. “Those managing systems change work need to pay extra attention to helping stakeholders to remain motivated and committed, to suppressing pathological behavior, and to improving stakeholders’ capacity to accumulate relevant knowledge and other resources that increase the number of options for productive action,” say Seelos and Mair.¹¹

Weavers value and respect others who are doing related innovation work. “There are a number of networks in west Michigan working on talent,” notes Guest. “Hundreds of people are

contributing to improving the talent system, and if you want to be successful, you have to be patient enough to get to know people and refrain from judgment.”

The Carbon Neutral Cities Alliance (CNCA) recognized that limiting access to its funds for innovation projects to its 22 member cities created the perception that it was an elitist group, a club. In 2021, recalls former Alliance Director Johanna Partin, “We asked ourselves, what could we do to support the many more cities around the world that were demonstrating leadership but didn’t meet our membership criteria, without throwing out our criteria, which is a key differentiator for CNCA? How could we broaden the tent? We recognized that we were not the only innovative cities in the world. Others may not have our targets but were doing some groundbreaking work. How could we benefit from their expertise? We had a real need to figure out what we were doing in the Global South especially.” So, CNCA decided to open its Game Changer Fund to non-member cities and Indigenous nation governments.

Weavers regularly assess the network’s connectivity – a key indicator of health – and work to improve it. We made this point in *Connecting to Change the World: take the network’s pulse*. We presented a framework for network assessment that examined connectivity, health, and impact. We noted that to assess a network, you must look closely at its members’ multiple value propositions and web of relationships, their decision-making processes, and the stage of the network’s evolution.

Trusted Strategist

Network leaders live in the tension between decision making by the members and decision making by the leadership, especially staff. “I talk about this with every network client,” says network consultant Ullman. “They have to balance a member-driven and a staff-driven approach. Members are not the experts in network building or field building; staff are. So, there’s a push and pull. Especially if the network has to make a strategic pivot.”

Members must be a big part of strategy-making, of course. But aggregating members’ insights and preferences do not automatically lead to a well-honed strategy that doesn’t just default to “all of the above,” everything members want. “Full-fledged experiments in consensus have gone wrong when organizations interpret power sharing to mean a free-for-all in which everyone has equal say,” observe Cea and Rimington. “Without thoughtfully designed roles and processes, sharing power can lead to confusion, delays, and even injustice, as those most impacted by a decision may not have commensurate say to influence it.”¹²

Strategists blend multiple inputs to formulate strategies. What’s ideal is a situation in which the membership trusts the leadership to (a) hear its concerns and ideas, (b) develop a strategic approach for moving forward that incorporates other information, such as funder preferences or factors external to the network, then (c) submit a plan to the membership for feedback, and finally (d) adopt a plan. This balances the top-down and bottom-up approaches, but it depends heavily on the members’ trust in leadership.

“I had a good sense of what the members were prioritizing,” notes CNCA’s Partin. “But I could also say, ‘Here’s a strategy I think would benefit the network most effectively.’ And I could gently guide the network’s conversation in that direction. You have to listen to the members, but at some point, you have to be a leader who can make a strategic decision. It’s a nuanced balance.” As an example, she offers the network’s Game Changer Fund, launched in 2021, to mobilize the development, adoption, and implementation of game-changing climate policies in cities worldwide. “It wasn’t an idea that came from the members. It came my observation of what I was seeing in the landscape and what we were hearing from members that they needed. Taking all of that, swirling it around, and coming up with a new directional strategy. I put it on the table and the members agreed.”

Strategists use strategy-making to make choices and set priorities for the network. We’ve seen strategic network plans that list 10-12 strategies or more; far too many for the membership to understand and remember or for the leaders to focus on for effective implementation. The strategists have thrown in everything, usually to ensure something for everyone and to please the members, funders, stakeholders, and partners. This tends to happen when the network leadership doesn’t have a clear vision for the network’s future impact and when leadership defaults to “what the members want” rather than making difficult choices.

Even when a network member’s priorities are all over the map, it’s up to leaders to help align and focus strategy. Ullman recalls working with a national network with more than 300 organization members, some of whom conflicted with each other. “The leader needed to reset the trust between members before they could talk about strategy. Fortunately, they all trusted her and believed in her.” After rebuilding those relationships, she laid out several non-negotiable elements for the network’s strategic plan based on members’ input, such as embedding racial justice at the plan’s core. A first cut at the strategy yielded 8-10 strategic priorities designed to ensure many members could see their interests in the plan. But it wasn’t feasible to split up the network’s resources over that many efforts. Over time, the leader helped the network align around just 3-4 priorities that could be revisited and changed every few years.

Strategists ‘listen’ to the outside world to spot opportunities and risks for the network and maintain nimbleness to shift strategies accordingly. “If you’re not paying attention to what’s going on in the world and where the world is going, you will have a problem,” Tescher explains. “The network’s purpose evolves because the world evolves. It’s easy to get captured or to be too internally focused, so focused on the network that it’s hard to see how it might need to evolve.”

One advantage of networks is their flexibility. In theory, they don’t get locked into a strategy forever; they remain nimble. The more locked in they have gotten, the riskier it may seem to change strategy. “You never want to be so deep into something that you can’t come back out of it and make a different move,” says Ullman. When a network’s membership participation and revenues are down or members are in conflict, she continues, “leaders have to say, ‘Nope, this is not working. We have to pivot.’ But it can take a ton of effort to get people back on board. That’s why you have to catch these trends early. You should be constantly assessing and preparing to pivot, because it’s hard to build back trust in leadership.”

Significant changes are part of most innovation networks' lives, if only because they morph from tight collectives into broad communities and become networks of networks. "Part and parcel of building collectives and communities," reports Hargadon, "is knowing their limits: when they can become too insulated and when they should be dismantled."¹³

Strategists evaluate the network's performance to find ways to improve. Evaluation can often be a forgotten tool for improvement or, worse, can be regarded as just a compliance exercise dictated by a funder. Rarely is it built into the fabric of network operations. But network leaders can use probing evaluation processes to assess the fundamentals of the network, from purpose to performance, to "smell the smoke" that tells you something is going wrong and has to be fixed, and to generate insights about what to do next and what to change.

Storyteller

Every network has stories to tell. The stories provide the network's members with a shared identity. They inform people and organizations with whom the network engages, setting expectations for the network. They offer thought leadership to other innovators and entire fields, markets, and other scaling structures. And some stories help to make rain, bringing in revenue for the network.

Storytellers help craft a compelling narrative about the network's work. Network leaders are constantly trying to figure out the network's best story, how to tell it, and how to use it to 'seed' funder clouds. It's not easy. "We were not doing a good enough job of telling our story, and it's critical," Partin says of CNCA. "We were dated, in an old mindset about how to tell the story: writing case studies and best practice documents, and organizing webinars. That's not a good way to tell a story about innovations and lessons learned."

Storytellers shift the story as the network evolves. Early on, the story that matters is that of the network's aspiration, the development of its innovation capacities, and the potential of its innovations and other activities. You're selling informed hope. Down the road, though, the story has to change to one of the impacts; the way the world is changing due to network activities. You're selling hope, realized. The shift to an impact story is particularly important to maintain and attract investment.

The story that innovation networks tell potential investors also evolves. Typically, it starts as a tale of aspiration, a 'what could happen' story. It progresses into an account of building the capacity to innovate. Usually, the network's emerging collective is developed through weaving and aligning the participants. Then, the focus shifts to innovation activities like ideation, prototyping, and more, including a plan for scaling the innovation(s), before finally implementing a scaling pathway.

Having a clear strategic focus matters for storytelling. “Selling a network is selling a tool,” observes Ullman. “You buy tools to build something, not just to have them. But when you have no strategic focus, you only have a loose, unimpressive story to tell.”

Storytellers identify the most effective communication tools to use. At CNCA, Partin says, “Storytelling for the members and the network had not evolved in a way that was useful for scaling innovations.” CNCA concluded that the network should use short videos featuring the practitioners, not an intermediary, telling what they’d done and learned. “Think of TED talks—you see a good one and it’ll change your world view. But we had to enable our members to do that well. Most of our cities were not good at telling short video stories. Too often in the nonprofit space we say, ‘That’s expensive, that’s marketing. We don’t do that.’”

Storytellers use stories to build productive relationships with investors. A great deal has been written about social innovators’ challenges when seeking philanthropic funding, usually a core resource for social innovation. There’s a lot that networks cannot control about funders, and it’s often difficult for them to decode the intentions and language of foundations. Ultimately, though, what’s key to obtaining investment is to build deep, sustained relationships with investors who value your efforts. Without begging for money. “Most not-for-profits have a subservient relationship with foundations,” notes Phillip Jackson, founder of the Black Star Project in Chicago. “That’s not something we were willing to be. When we were coming to the foundation, we were saying, ‘Hey, you need us as much as we need you.’ . . . We have solutions, you have dollars to fund the solutions. Let’s work together.”¹⁴

Tell the network’s story in a way that invites foundations to be partners, not just grant-makers, and to recognize the demands of the system-changing work you (and they) have taken on. Build a relationship based on candor, mutual respect, and learning that can evolve. Offer to set impact goals together and commit to being a long-term partner with the funder.

Recognize, too, that investors can provide much more than money: they have insights, expertise, and connections, and they can also be inspiring.

Leaders as Learners

Leading an innovation network is a journey, a work in progress, not a destination. Innovation network leaders constantly adapt their approaches, identify what they know and are good at, and what else they need to know how to do. Their self-awareness makes it easier to accept critical feedback from others.

“God gave me *two* ears and just *one* mouth for a reason,” says Jeff Yost, CEO of the Nebraska Community Foundation. “I have needed to become a much better active listener. Not seeking to promote my ideas, but seeking to understand what people are sharing with me. This was hard for me.”

“I am generally a pleaser and hard on myself,” says Financial Health Network CEO Jennifer Tescher. “The speed and pace at which I like to operate doesn’t work for most people. I’ve needed to recognize that and grow as a leader. Mostly I have tried to mitigate my worst impulses and invest a lot in building a leadership team that can run the network day-to-day.”

In addition to learning to do things differently, network leaders must be ready and willing to learn from others, not think they have all the answers. “The most refreshing thing for me,” says Kishia Powell, chair of the US Water Alliance’s One Water Council and chief operating officer of DC Water, “the most freeing thing, is being able to say, ‘I don’t know. What do you think?’”¹⁵

These long-time innovation leaders acknowledge their shortcomings and how they are working to improve their abilities. They make a personal priority out of learning how to be better leaders. This requires excellent awareness, flexibility, feedback loops, and receptivity to feedback.

Leaders may have much to *unlearn*. Cea and Rimington say that the leadership unlearning that their research uncovered “included having to get comfortable with different ways of distributing decision-making authority, embracing uncertainty, and collectively imagining and creating a different way to be in community.”¹⁶ They provide an example: unlearning assumptions about the superiority of professional expertise as a type of knowledge. “It can be challenging for many people to accept that all types of knowledge are legitimate,” explain the scholars. “Because most innovation processes heavily privilege knowledge that reflects academic or technical training, it is important to actively source knowledge in other ways. This often requires people to unlearn what we refer to as ‘expert bias.’”¹⁷

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End Notes

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