

Network Perspective and Leadership: Are You Connected?



Network perspective is a 21st-century leadership imperative. But what is a network perspective, and how does it help your organization? And how do you, as a leader, build a network perspective?

What Does It Mean to Have a Network Perspective?

Network perspective is the ability to look beyond formal, designated relationships and see the complex web of connections between people in and beyond your organization.

It's one of the most important skills to develop for yourself — and your organization.

Network-savvy leaders intentionally develop the ability to see, understand, and engage the informal, invisible structure supporting the organization. They use this network

perspective to create [a more connected, interdependent culture at their organization](#). Some take it even further, expanding their organization's network throughout the world.

At the individual level, a network perspective allows you to move beyond the official structure (the "org chart") to get work done using informal networks. This perspective means knowing who has influence and where to go for information. It's also about seeing — and tapping into — the ties that extend beyond your organization into other organizations, communities, and society.

At a broad level, networks are a natural part of an interdependent yet volatile world. Many leaders and academics are coming to the conclusion that our understanding of leadership should consider both the natural and strategically created networks.

The Connection Between Network Perspective and Leadership

Since we live in an extremely complex, changing, and interconnected world, the ability to understand and leverage informal organizational networks and connections is vital and crucial for leaders. In an environment that involves tough decision-making quickly and often, leaders can no longer rely on hierarchy or traditional approaches to get information or make things happen.

By embracing leadership as a shared process that engages and creates networks, organizational leaders with network savvy create several benefits:

- An increase in the *collective capacity* for leadership;
- The enabling of others to step up, adjust, and make decisions about the future of a project, team, organization, or community; and
- The transformation of the leadership culture from reliance on command-and-control hierarchies to adaptation within agile, interdependent networks.

Informal Networks Can Strengthen Your Organization's Strategy

As we note in our [research white paper](#), informal networks can strengthen your organization's strategy. The patterns and quality of informal social networks connecting members of an organization greatly affect its ability to succeed in a competitive marketplace. Suboptimal patterns of communication and influence may alienate critical future talent and lead to problems in strategy development and implementation.

Analyzing the networks of top executives uncovers gaps between how communication and influence should ideally flow — and how they do in reality. That network analysis opens the door to building network connections that can improve retention of high-potential talent and ultimately, optimize the development and execution of the organization's strategy.

Senior leaders in particular should pay attention to their organization's leadership networks and strengthen ties where they matter most. Executives will want to ensure that high-potential middle managers are engaged and that their contributions are weighted appropriately by the top management team, which is critical to avoiding riskier, less robust, or ineffective organizational strategies.

Why Leaders Need a Network Perspective

Now that you know what a network perspective is and the benefits of it for individuals and organizations, here's why leaders need a network perspective:

1. Connections matter.

Individuals don't exist in isolation and their connections provide opportunities, access to valuable information and resources, and also create constraints. The people they're connected to influence their ideas, attitudes, and behaviors.

2. Work often happens through informal channels.

Even after decades of restructuring, work activities often occur through interactions outside of formal reporting and working relationships. Understanding informal networks is especially important in flat, team-based, and agile work environments where formal structure provides little guidance.

3. Leadership occurs through relationships.

[Direction, alignment, and commitment are created through relationships](#) between people working on shared challenges. All people contribute to this process and thus, leadership may be shared throughout the network. Further, boundary spanning leadership requires network perspective to accurately see and build connections between groups.

4. Successful leaders develop networks of strong, diverse relationships.

They realize that under- and over-connectivity stifle performance and limit outcomes. Purposeful (strategic) and authentic networking is the key to developing healthy networks that prevent insularity. They [work collaboratively across boundaries](#) (like hierarchies, geographic regions, functional silos, stakeholder interests, and demographic differences) to build relationships with diverse groups of people.

5. Network knowledge is an asset in change efforts.

Relying on formal, vertical channels alone hinders the capacity to adapt to emerging issues. Change efforts may be accelerated by activating and enhancing the network's capacity to span boundaries. This approach is critically important in cultural transformation because [organizational culture lives largely within the conversations between people](#). Understanding these connections provides insights into subcultures, pockets of resistance, and hidden champions of the transformation.

6. Innovation networks can be identified and supported.

Innovation first requires new, creative ideas. But new ideas are not enough; they must be [implemented in the organization through a targeted innovation process](#). Research suggests network structures that facilitate creativity and implementation differ from each other in specific ways. Organizations need networks that support the generation

and sharing of diverse ideas, as well as collective action. (It also helps when people understand how their [role in driving innovation depends on where they sit.](#))

7. The most important challenges leaders face today are interdependent.

Complex challenges can't be addressed by individuals alone; they're best solved by groups of people across boundaries working together.

All in all, having a network perspective is the key to thriving in a world in which everything is, or will be, connected.

Reference

Center for Creative Leadership (CCL)

<https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/networks-and-leadership-are-you-connected/>