

What Roles Can Grantmakers Play in Supporting Networks?

Grantmakers of all kinds care about tangible progress on tough problems, but we also seek harder-to-measure results. Networks for social change can help on both of these fronts, building new capacity for making progress on complex problems and achieving significant measurable results. Tapping into network connections is becoming the norm for social change makers, whether we're mapping influential relationships for an advocacy campaign, coordinating a protest to fight climate change or spreading an approach to community engagement. For funders, supporting and investing in networks is a prerequisite for remaining relevant in a world of fast moving information and ideas and tackling persistent, complex problems. This piece introduces the value of networks for making progress on complex problems, along with typical roles that funders play in networks, and it offers recommendations for investing in them most effectively.

Social networks are simply people connected by relationships. They occur naturally and are all around us. They're inside, outside and between our organizations. These groups of relationships can take on a variety of forms and can be both formal and centralized, and informal and decentralized. Different forms they can take on include:

- Networks embedded within and between organizations (e.g., like partnerships at the local level to provide direct services);
- Membership organizations (e.g., AARP, Sierra Club);
- Multi-hub networks (e.g., affiliate models like Habitat for Humanity);
- Tightly knit networks (e.g., many coalitions, alliances, learning communities); and
- Networks of networks (e.g., Facebook).

By embracing a new way of thinking and working that is rooted in shared understanding and oriented toward engagement, grantmakers can effectively use the power of networks to make progress on complex problems and grow our own impact and that of our grantees. But it's hard to know where to start.

For more information on this topic, see [*Catalyzing Networks for Social Change: A Funder's Guide*](#), (Washington, D.C.: Grantmakers for Effective Organizations and Monitor Institute, 2011).

Benefits of Supporting Networks

Grantmakers and social change makers are harnessing the power of networks to achieve positive social benefits in five key ways:

Weave social ties.

Building community and strengthening social capital have long been at the core of neighborhood organizing and revitalization efforts. Now, *network weaving* is helping grantmakers amplify our place-based efforts and work with communities that span geographies.

Access new and diverse perspectives.

Foundation program staff members are often hired for their connections in a given field, which they can draw on to access potential grantees, advice and inspiration. But there will always be smart people and important perspectives that funders are not connected to, as well as gaps in worldview between funders, social change leaders and grantee constituents. Network connections and social media tools are giving grantmakers access to the ideas and expertise of many more individuals and stakeholders than ever before.

Openly build and share knowledge.

Nonprofits that use a federated or affiliate model have long known the benefits of sharing best practices across their networks. Now others are learning to do the same through communities of practice and in-depth professional development, like fellowship programs, that tap into collective intelligence.

Create infrastructure for widespread engagement.

Networks are vehicles for motivating people to act and mobilize collective action on a large scale, because activity can spread quickly without being routed through a central authority. By creating infrastructure that enables people to connect with one another and with new opportunities, network platforms can catalyze widespread engagement.

Coordinate resources and action.

Once groups of people are connected to each other, the opportunity to coordinate resources and action increases exponentially. This might happen through an intentional process with central direction or a less structured and more opportunistic approach.

Building the Capacity of Networks

Grantmakers large and small are in a special position to cultivate networks for social change. We have a broad view of activity across different fields and related issue areas, often work across geographies, and are in a position to bring influentials and beneficiaries together. But it's not always easy. Most funders want to broker connections, but we often don't see ourselves as full participants or don't want to be at the center of the network. Yet, investing in networks often demands a more hands-on approach, which can require time-consuming participation and result in greater reliance on the funder, at least in the short term.

Furthermore, standard grantmaking practices are set up to serve stand-alone organizations rather than messy, dynamic groups of people and organizations that may not even have a 501(c)(3) status. This work means developing new approaches toward due diligence, determining where the money can go and the type of support needed, and setting expectations for measuring impact.

The good news is that investing in networks is not uncharted territory. More and more grantmakers have experience with supporting networks — and there is emerging insight about where funders can place our resources and how we can do so most effectively.

Cultivating Networks by Phases

Funders can invest in a number of ways to foster networks for social change. These funding opportunities are organized around what might be particularly helpful at different stages in a network's life cycle, as illustrated in the diagram below. Because networks are continuously changing and evolving, many of the investment opportunities mentioned for one stage will continue to be relevant in later stages as well.

Know the network.

Social change makers and their constituencies, opponents and allies are all embedded in webs of connection. A first step in catalyzing a network is to better understand the existing relationships, centers of power, intersecting issues and levers for change among all of these parties. Knowing the network means pausing to understand the context:

- What existing connections might be tapped?
- Who are the influential players?
- Who ought to be involved but currently is not?

Knit and organize the network.

Once there's an understanding of the basics — who is in the network, who ought to be and how the players, power and potential interrelate — we can begin to set up an infrastructure to better connect different parties or nodes for sustained work. Here, if there is no clear network center or hub, like a 501(c)(3) intermediary that can receive, manage and distribute funds and other resources, seek out a neutral trusted entity.

Graphic: How can foundations cultivate networks?

The diagram outlines the typical life cycle for a network and the ways in which participants (including funders) can help increase effectiveness. While there is no universal pattern, most networks focused on achieving a goal (versus remaining a loose social group) tend to evolve according to this pattern.



The diagram is adapted from Innovations for Scaling Impact (iScale), with input from the work of Valdis Krebs and June Holley. See iScale's [Network Life Cycle and Impact Planning, Assessment, Reporting and Learning Systems](#) (iScale, 2011); and Valdis Krebs and June Holley, "[Building Smart Communities through Network Weaving](#)" (2006).

Organize and grow the network.

When growing a network, focus on supporting the infrastructure and systems needed to grow the connections and the work, and on spreading responsibility across actors. This could mean offering modest amounts of money to help network members test a new idea or funding leadership development in and across a network, such as through a community of practice, rather than simply investing in isolated nonprofit leaders. Grantmakers can point network leaders to other resources they need, such as facilitation, process design and potential network contacts, fund network evaluation and help mobilize more funding for the network by inviting other foundation peers to join.

Transition the network.

Networks are ever changing. Success is a continuous evolution and adaptation to the needs of participants. A temporary collaboration may be all that's needed. Or, as is often the case, multiple sub-networks may emerge and spin off into separate projects. As the network nears a transition point, our investment strategy will change as well.

Roles for Grantmakers

Funders are experimenting with playing a range of roles in networks and trying out a host of staffing configurations to support them. Typical roles that grantmakers play in networks include the following:

- **Catalyst:** establishes purpose or vision, and first links to participants during the knitting the network stage.
- **Sponsor:** provides resources for knitting, organizing, growing and transitioning or transforming the network.
- **Weaver:** works to increase connections among participants and grows the network by connecting to new participants (during knitting and growing stages).
- **Coach:** provides advice, as needed, once trust is established and power dynamics are well understood.
- **Participant:** participates in the network without assuming a direct leadership role.
- **Assessor:** diagnoses network needs and progress, and recommends next steps.

Individual grantmaking organizations can play single or multiple roles in a network. For example, the [Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation](#) utilizes a network officer position. These staff members act as weavers and coaches; they have responsibility for making connections among people and information

and advising the networks they're supporting. For instance, one network officer supporting a diverse group of advocates working on constitutional reform in Alabama makes it her job to know who is working on the issues and to broker introductions. This requires artfully encouraging connections across adversaries, as well as being in constant conversation with the network and asking tough questions like, "What is it going to take to win, and who must be at the table to make this a reality?"

Intermediaries can also be engaged to take on these roles. The [Barr Foundation](#) hired a network weaver to make connections among people involved with the after-school community in Boston. The weaver was positioned to be independent of the foundation, acting as a bridge between Barr and the sector. The Barr Foundation's role was to sponsor and assess the network and coach the weaver.

Conclusion

It's hard to imagine what the world will look like even five years from now, much less in a decade or more. But we can be sure that technologies for connecting individuals and ideas will continue to evolve and spread, that both people and problems will become more interconnected and interdependent, and that those who feel empowered to make a difference will grow in diversity and number. Now and in the future, it will be incumbent on funders to stimulate, harness and support the networks that will arise from this new landscape. By offering the right types of support as networks grow and evolve and playing different roles as needed, funders can ensure the issues we all care about are more effectively addressed now and in the future.