Roadmap to Improving Your Network: 
Aspire, Assess, Act
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Introduction

How do you help your network become more effective?

The answer to this question depends on where you are as a network. Most networks are new, emerging, are all-volunteer, and/or have few resources. For those who fit this bill, this Toolkit is for you! This Toolkit offers an incremental approach to improving your network using the following three step process:

In Step One, Aspire, you work to understand what the members of your network want your ideal network to look like.

In Step Two, you Assess your current network and identify its strengths and areas where more work is needed.

And, finally, in Step Three, Act, you select a few focus areas and take action to improve your network.

This Toolkit describes each step and offers practical tools to help you move through each one. Keep in mind that network improvement is neither linear, nor a one-time effort -- it is an iterative, interconnected process where improvement in one area simultaneously yields improvement elsewhere.

For those who feel ready to undertake a comprehensive network development effort, please consult our companion guidebook, A Comprehensive Approach to Network Development. The comprehensive approach is a full fledged process, where your network makes a 6-12 month commitment to develop the support system and structure it takes for an intentional change network to become transformative. Most of the material is also covered in a Powerpoint which can be accessed here. You can copy and reuse these slides in your community.
Aspire: Where do you want to be?

Before you start a new network, or make an existing network more effective, you need to get a sense of what your ideal network might look like. Here’s how to do that:

Step One
Print out and share the chart below entitled, “Characteristics of an Effective Network” with the group.

Step Two
As a large group, review the major categories needed in an effective network (e.g. People & Relationships, Culture & Alignment, Action, Structure, Support). The Powerpoint entitled, “Network Building for Social Change: Your Ideal Network - How to Get There” can be used to help you explain more about each category to the group.

Step Three
For each category, have network participants develop a clear picture of what they want the network to be like. How you structure this activity depends on how much time you have, group size and if you are doing it in person or online. One approach might be to facilitate the entire group through a brainstorming exercise where they develop their own list of criteria for each category (e.g. People & Relationships, Culture & Alignment, Action, Structure, Support). Make sure to capture the criteria on flipchart paper, Post-it notes, or some other method.

Step Four
Close the session by summarizing the major criteria the group came up with when discussing their vision of an ideal network. Remember to ask someone to volunteer to type the session notes and distribute them to the group, and schedule a follow-up gathering.
## Characteristics of an Effective Network

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>IDEAL NETWORK</th>
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| **People & Relationships** | Your network of diverse individuals and organizations is well-connected, growing, working as peers, and building trust. Everyone in the network takes responsibility for bringing in new people and connecting others. Everyone is a network leader.  
- Your network is large and growing.  
- People in the network are connected to lots of other people in the network.  
- Your network includes diverse individuals and organizations.  
- Your network core is connected to the margins and has a well-developed periphery.  
- Sub-groups (clusters) with the network are well-connected to each other.  
- Many people in your network serve as network leaders.  
- People in the network trust each other and interact as peers.  
- People in the network listen to each other and are open to new perspectives.  
- The network explicitly address issues of power and privilege related to race, gender and class. |
| **Culture & Alignment** | People in the network operate with a Network Mindset* and are aligned around a common purpose which they helped identify.  
- People in the network value openness, transparency, and letting go of control.  
- People in the network value inclusion, diversity, and new ideas.  
- People in the network are flexible, open to change, and comfortable with uncertainty.  
- People feel positively about the network.  
- Network convenings include time and space for relationship-building.  
- People in the network are introduced to the network culture when they become part of the network.  
- Network convenings and calls include time for group reflection and learning from experience.  
- The network has aligned and is intentionally working on some common issue, problem or opportunity.  
- The network helps people identify areas where they might want to collaborate with others on projects.  
- The network is ready to coordinate and communicate more intentionally about actions and strategies.  
- People feel they “own” the network and are responsible for ensuring that it operates based on a Network Mindset. |

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*Network Mindset: A shared understanding and practice of network thinking and action that promotes collective problem-solving, collaboration, and learning.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>IDEAL NETWORK</th>
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</table>
| Collaborative Action | Many people are identifying opportunities, pulling together people and resources to make something happen, and taking action that makes a difference.  
● People are empowered to take initiative to start projects and take action.  
● There is lots of action in the network.  
● Network projects are highly effective.  
● People have the resources and access to expertise they need to start and act on projects.  
● The network experiments with different approaches.  
● Action in the network is well-coordinated and connected. Project groups collaborate with each other.  
● People follow through on projects.  
● Network subgroups make a conscious effort to include new people and build new leadership.  
● Project coordinators are trained, coached and supported.  
● Network subgroups share what they are learning with each other. |
| Support        | The network has developed a system of support that includes interactive communications, training and learning, resources that support self-organizing, and tracking to identify progress and areas for further work.  
● People in the network have a good understanding of how healthy networks function.  
● People in the network know how to build relationships, coordinate projects and effectively convene the network.  
● The network has support systems in place such as training and communications.  
● The network has taken time to understand (map) the system it is trying to change.  
● The network has pools of funds to support collaborative action.  
● The network is able to find the resources it needs, and the infrastructure of the network is well-resourced.  
● The network actively develops diverse leadership.  
● The network has a system for tracking its progress.  
● The network has a sense of its strengths and challenges. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>IDEAL NETWORK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Structure** | People in the network are aware of how networks function and have a well-developed structure for network operations, coordination, and decision-making.  
  ● The network has a clear purpose, guiding principles, a strategic direction and has identified leverage points to focus actions.  
  ● The network has developed clear processes for convening, coordinating, communicating, learning, training, and conflict resolution.  
  ● How and by whom decisions are made has been agreed upon.  
  ● The network has clearly articulated roles for staff and participants.  
  ● The network agrees on how action will be generated.  
  ● The network has processes and roles for raising money, developing other resources, and has developed clear and fair processes for how resources are allocated.  
  ● The network has agreed to track progress to improve its effectiveness. |
Assess: Where are we now?

Now that you have some idea of what network participants want in an ideal network, it’s time to understand where you are. Here’s what to do:

**Step One**
First, have as many people as possible take the Network Assessment Survey. The survey contains 48 questions and will take no more than 15 minutes to complete. To administer the survey to your group, please make a copy of the editable survey. Using this link, click on the three dots in the upper right and select Make a Copy. A copy will appear in your Google Drive. Move it into your network’s Google folder, and customize it by adding your network’s name. Email the survey to your network or convert the link provided into a shorter URL using bitly. Or, if you have an all network gathering, you can have them take the survey on a mobile phone and project the results on a large screen.

**Step Two**
Share the results (click on the link labelled “See Previous Responses”) and schedule a time to debrief them.

**Step Three**
Hold a debriefing session. When debriefing the survey results, the group should first identify the areas with the highest scores. These represent the network’s strengths. Take time to discuss how to build on those strengths and scale them. Then use the lowest scores to identify areas the group would like to improve. Also take note of any questions where the ratings differ significantly - this indicates that the group needs to take time to understand the reasons behind the discrepancy.

**Step Four**
Ask a volunteer to type up the notes from the meeting and schedule a follow-up session.
Act: How do we get there?

Now that you’ve done the work to figure out where you are and where you want to go, the next step is to take the necessary actions to get there. In most cases, people in new and emerging networks volunteer their time, and have limited access to resources. For this reason, this guidebook focuses on outlining steps to incrementally improve your network, taking one or two actions at a time. For those who are able to take on more, take a look at our companion guidebook, *A Comprehensive Approach to Network Development*, when it is available in January 2017.

**Step One**
Identify challenges from the **Network Assessment Survey** by having participants identify the areas where the network scored the lowest, and pick one or two to improve. Alternatively, list the lowest scoring questions from the survey on a piece of chart paper and have people put red dots on the two underlying issues they think are most pressing.

**Step Two**
Form small groups based on the 2-3 items with the most dots or lowest scores. Small action groups can then decide on specific actions to address those challenges, using the handout **Actions to Address Challenges** for ideas and inspiration. These small groups should be encouraged to meet outside of regular network meetings, and asked to report back at meetings of the whole network. For a basic description of collaborative workgroups, click here for the handout entitled **What Does a Collaborative Need to Function Well?**. Be sure to give this document to each group so they know how to set up basic documents accessible to all.
# Actions to Address Challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>IDEAL NETWORK</th>
<th>CHALLENGES</th>
<th>ACTIONS TO ADDRESS CHALLENGES &amp; CREATE IDEAL NETWORK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People &amp; Relationships</td>
<td>• Your network is large, growing and diverse.</td>
<td>• There are not enough or the right people/orgs in the network.</td>
<td>• Map the network and identify key individuals and groups who are missing or underrepresented. Create an outreach strategy (see Activity 1: Map Your Network).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• People in the network are connected to lots of other people in the network.</td>
<td>• The network isn’t diverse.</td>
<td>• Make sure meetings include time to build relationships. (See Activity 2: Speed Networking)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The network core is connected to the margins and has a well-developed periphery.</td>
<td>• People don’t know each other well enough.</td>
<td>• At meetings, or using surveys, use clustering to help people find others interested in the same thing, and help them form a collaborative project (See Activity 3: Clustering).</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sub-groups (clusters) with the network are well-connected to each other.</td>
<td>• The network has sub-groups that aren’t connected.</td>
<td>• Encourage many different people to lead small sections of meetings to learn new skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Many people serve as network leaders.</td>
<td>• The network lacks energy.</td>
<td>• Provide fun peer learning sessions on basic network concepts.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Network participants trust each other.</td>
<td>• Some members are not engaged.</td>
<td>• Provide training in conflict resolution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Network participants interact as peers.</td>
<td>• It is hard to get people to come to meetings.</td>
<td>• Have small group time at meetings so everyone gets a chance to speak.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Network participants listen to each other and are open to new perspectives.</td>
<td>• There is lack of trust in the group.</td>
<td>• Bring in an outside facilitator to help the network address power and privilege in the network.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The network explicitly addresses issues of power and privilege related to race, gender and class.</td>
<td>• Leadership is not well-distributed.</td>
<td>• Use network culture survey to help people shift to a Network Mindset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture &amp; Alignment</td>
<td>• Network participants value openness, transparency, and letting go of control.</td>
<td>• Network participants do not understand network culture.</td>
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</table>
**Desired outcomes:**

1. **Stronger ties between network members** (e.g. know each other better, trust each other, feel safe to share honestly)

2. **Shared alignment around the network’s overall reason for being and underlying values**

- Network participants value inclusion, diversity, and new ideas.
- Network participants are flexible, open to change, and comfortable with uncertainty.
- People feel positively about the network.
- Network convenings include time and space for relationship-building.
- Network convenings include time for group reflection and learning from experience.
- The network has aligned and is intentionally working on some issue, problem or opportunity.
- The network helps people identify areas where they might want to work with others on collaborative projects.
- The network is ready to coordinate and communicate more intentionally about actions and strategies.
- People feel they "own" the network and are responsible for ensuring that it operates based on a Network Mindset.

- There are low levels of trust in network.
- The network is not very innovative or collaborative.
- The network is not inclusive.
- The network is not dealing with issues of privilege, race or class.
- The network is not aligned.
- Network participants have not found a way to meaningfully engage and connect with others around their passions.
- People tend to look to staff or a few people to make things happen in the network.

**Collaborative Action**

**Desired outcomes:**

- Many people are identifying opportunities to take action, and pulling together the people and resources needed to make it happen.

- There is not enough getting done (talk network).
- There are problems working collaboratively.

- Help people cluster and form collaborative learning and action projects (See Activity 3: Clustering).

(See Activity 4: Network Culture Survey).

- Make sure leadership is modeling Network Mindset.
- To build trust, have people form a circle and take turns telling a story about their life.
- Have people break into small groups to discuss the purpose and/or focal point of the network. Have each group share on chart paper some of the ideas generated. Have someone summarize all the charts and present back to the network.
1. An energized network that is successfully taking action
2. An adaptive network that is sharing key learnings and continuously integrating them into the fabric of the network

| People are empowered to take initiative to start projects and take action. |
| There is lots of action in the network. |
| Network projects are highly effective. |
| People have the resources and access to expertise they need to start and act on projects. |
| The network experiments with different approaches. |
| Action in the network is well-coordinated and connected. Project groups collaborate with each other. |
| People follow through on projects. |
| Network subgroups make a conscious effort to include new people and build new leadership. |
| Project coordinators are trained, coached and supported. |
| Network subgroups share what they are learning with each other. |

| There is not enough leadership to get projects started. |
| People are not sure how to initiate action. |
| Few people initiate action. |
| Projects do not share what they are doing and learning with the rest of the network. |

| Provide coaching and collaborative skill development so that projects are successful. |
| Set up a system of small stipends for project coordinators. |
| Encourage projects to share, through email, Facebook, etc., the successes and struggles of their projects. |

- **Support**
  - Desired outcomes:
    1. Network participants have the skills to build the network
    - People in the network have a good understanding of how healthy networks function.
    - People in the network know how to build relationships, coordinate projects and
    - People don’t have a sense of their network or the system they are trying to change.
    - People in the network don’t know what is going on (Inadequate communication).

    - Do a simple Post-it note session to map the network and the system the network is trying to change (see **Activity 1: Map Your Network**).
    - Set up a communication ecosystem for the whole network and provide
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. and manage projects effectively</th>
<th>2. The network has sufficient resources</th>
<th>3. The network regularly evaluates its effectiveness and adapts as necessary</th>
<th>4. Network participants are well-informed (the communication system works well)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>effectively convene the network.</td>
<td>● The network has support systems in place such as training and communications.</td>
<td>● The network has pools of funds to support collaborative action.</td>
<td>● The network actively develops diverse leadership.</td>
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<tr>
<td>● The network has support systems in place such as training and communications.</td>
<td>● The network has taken time to understand (map) the system it is trying to change.</td>
<td>● The network is able to find the resources it needs, and the infrastructure of the network is well-resourced.</td>
<td>● The network has a system for tracking its progress.</td>
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<tr>
<td>● There are no resources (money or expertise) for projects.</td>
<td>● People do not have the skills needed to make the network a success.</td>
<td>● The network has a sense of its strengths and challenges.</td>
<td>● There are no resources (money or expertise) for projects.</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Set up innovation or seed funds that provide small grants for collaborative projects (See Activity 6: Seed Fund).</td>
<td>● Set up a resource pool of experts that are available to projects and a way to fund the experts' time.</td>
<td>● Set up Communities of Practice to help people learn network skills and help each other with challenges (see Activity 7: Communities of Practice).</td>
<td>● Set up a tracking system that helps people see if they are making progress in developing the network.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
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<td><strong>Desired outcome:</strong> The network has the necessary infrastructure to be self-sustaining</td>
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<tr>
<td>• People in the network are aware of how networks function and have a well-developed structure for network operations, coordination, fundraising and decision-making.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The structure is able to change and evolve as needed for effectiveness.</td>
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<td>• The network has a clear purpose, guiding principles, a strategic direction and has identified leverage points to focus actions.</td>
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<td>• By whom and how decisions are made has been agreed upon.</td>
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<td>• The network has clearly articulated roles for staff and participants.</td>
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<td>• The network processes and roles for raising money, developing other resources, and clear and fair processes for how resources are allocated.</td>
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<td>• The network has agreed to track progress.</td>
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<td>• There is not enough coordination - meetings are not regular, tasks not followed up on.</td>
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<td>• People don’t have a clear idea of network structures, strategies, etc.</td>
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<td>• The network structure is rigid.</td>
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<td>• The network is rudderless and people are unclear about its purpose.</td>
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<td>• There is conflict in the network, but no one knows what to do or how to resolve it.</td>
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<td>• People are not sure how to decide what to do.</td>
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<td>• It is not clear who sends out messages about what.</td>
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<td>• The network does not have a clear decision-making process.</td>
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<td>• There is not enough money to hire coordinator or support projects.</td>
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<td>• People don’t know who does what.</td>
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<td>• The network lacks fundraising capacity.</td>
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<td>• People feel money is allocated unfairly.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Raise funds for a part-time coordinator</td>
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<td>• Set up Google docs with participant lists, tasks and timeline, etc</td>
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<td>• Determine how people in the network will learn about network structure.</td>
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<td>• Set up a network development group to work on structure.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Articulate a decision-making structure (governing board, circles, or a hybrid) and who makes decisions about what.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Organize a group to determine how fundraising and money allocation will work in the network.</td>
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</table>
Activities
Activity 1. Map Your Network

This is a fundamental activity for every network to help build connectivity - the essential building-block of any effective network. Mapping your network yields a helpful picture that shows you who knows who, who is missing, and who is not well-connected to others.

Directions:
Have each individual in the room write their name on a Post-it note. Have one person put their note on a large whiteboard or use several pieces of chart paper taped together. Then have a second person put their name on the board. If they work closely with the first person, they should put their Post-it close to that person’s. If not, put their Post-it further away. If they have a relationship, have them draw a line between the two Post-its.

Have everyone in the room, one at a time, put their name on the board, making sure they put their Post-it closest to those they work with most. They should draw lines to people they work with frequently.

Then have the group notice any clusters of people who work together frequently. Are there people or clusters who are not connected or are poorly connected? Is there a “hub” - a person who many people are connected to?

Next, around the outside edge, put Post-its for individuals or groups that are not currently part of this network, but who could add value if they were involved. These might be people with expertise, people from others communities who have been innovating in ways that would be of value to your initiative, or people who are often left out of projects (people of color, low-income individuals, individuals being served by the initiative, young people, elders, etc).

Finally, have each person identify 1 or 2 things that they can do to improve the network. This might include:
- Committing to get together with someone in the room they currently do not know or know well (a “twosie”)
- Setting up a group email and committing to use it to share information about things happening in the network
- Connecting two people you know have something in common
- Reaching out to bring a new person into the network
Activity 2. Speed Networking

This is a great activity that you can use at the start of every meeting, using different questions to help improve the number and quality of connections between network participants. The important part is the debrief that helps people become more aware of their listening skills. This session can be done in person or virtually using virtual conferencing platforms such as Adobe Connect, Maestro or Zoom that have the capacity for breakout rooms.

Encourage participants to use this activity at the start of all their meetings and convenings, changing the questions to suit the topic of the gathering. This is a simple way to encourage them to become network leaders.

Directions:

Have everyone stand up and find someone they don't know, or don't know well. Have them take turns listening to each other as they answer one of the questions listed below. You can adapt the questions to fit the topic of the meeting. Give each pair about 5 minutes for the entire exchange. After 2.5 minutes, remind them to change partners if they haven't already.

After the first round, have the group debrief the experience. Ask “Who had a really good listener?” Then ask one of those who raise their hands what that person did that made them aware they were listening well. Ask several others to point out other aspects of good listening (eye contact, leaning towards me, restating answers, asking questions, etc).

Then have people find another person they don’t know and repeat the activity with another question. After this, ask people if they found themselves listening more effectively.

Sample questions:

1. What excites you about the idea of networks?
2. What would you like to learn about networks?
3. What is an example of a very effective network you have been a part of?
Activity 3. Clustering
This activity is terrific for helping network participants find like-minded people who share the same interests and want to work on similar types of projects. Clustering helps build and strengthen relationships, increase trust, generate alignment, and facilitate action --- all at the same time.

Directions:
Have people at a meeting answer a question such as:

1. What do you think would make the most difference in your network right now (and that you would be willing to put energy into)?
2. What do you most want to learn about with others?
3. What is an action you’d like to take right now with others?

Have them write an answer on a larger Post-it and add their name. Have them post these on a wall and take a break.

During the break, ask several volunteers to cluster similar answers together on the wall and create a short title for each cluster. On pieces of flipchart paper, ask them to write each cluster title and transfer the corresponding Post-it notes. Place each piece of flipchart paper (with corresponding Post-its) on a separate table.

When people return from their break, have them find the table with their topic.

Have each group share why they selected that topic, why they think their topic is important, what they think is a small action or two the group could do together, when they might meet next, and who is willing to act as a group coordinator to remind the group about the meeting and set up a group email.

Organizers need to gather all the information about each group and check in with group coordinators a week later.
Activity 4: Network Culture Survey

*This activity helps groups align around the behaviors and attitudes that characterize a “Network Mindset” and form the basis for the network’s culture.*

**Directions:**
For each item, put a number between 1 and 5 to describe how characteristic this is of yourself, your organization or your network. 5 means this item is very characteristic of you or your organization or your network and 1 means that it is not yet expressed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Meme</th>
<th>Personal</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Network</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive</td>
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<td>Transparent</td>
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<td>Value diversity and difference</td>
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<td>Innovative</td>
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<td>Opportunity Seeking</td>
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<td>Embracing of errors</td>
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<td>Learning</td>
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<td>Experimental</td>
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<td>Comfortable with uncertainty</td>
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<td>Value reflection and learning</td>
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<td>Playful and fun</td>
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<td>Interact as peers</td>
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<td>Appreciative</td>
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<td>Collaborative</td>
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<td>Transformative</td>
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<td>Self-aware</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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Once you have completed the chart, talk over what you discovered.

Select three you would most like to work on in the next month. Try keeping a journal on your progress.
**Activity 5: Communication Ecosystem**

This activity provides an opportunity to think about all the ways that your network can be connected through communications platforms and tools.

Healthy and effective networks benefit from a robust communications ecosystem - a set of tools, places, and platforms that enable interaction and discussion to occur easily among participants (not mediated by any central individual or organization).

It’s beneficial to have the network (or a working group) explicitly identify the current communication ecosystem (see sample below), and add new platforms as needed. People will often need training and ongoing coaching to use these tools, so you will need to identify some individuals to fill this role.

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**Sample Communication Ecosystem**

![Diagram of communication ecosystem](chart.png)

- **Track network development**
  - Google docs for collaboration space
  - Track network through dashboards

- **Build relationships and Collaborate**
  - Video conferencing for group work and learning, CoP
  - Skype: Google hangs out for webinars

- **Capture and share ideas for innovation**
  - Internet research
  - Scoopit (curate innovations on topic)

- **Share and discuss information**
  - Web page w discussion groups/data base
  - Twitter (bring in new ideas)

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**Communication Ecosystem Worksheet**

**Directions:**
Using the diagram above, help your network and/or leadership cohort(s) design a communication ecosystem. Which platform or platforms will the network use for information sharing? For relationship building? For collaboration? For new ideas?

Initial work can often be done by a small design group which can bring a draft to the whole network for feedback. Then the design group needs to set up the platforms, and provide training in their use.

It's often a good idea to start with the basics – learning a web conferencing platform, setting up a group email, and organizing a Google docs folder. Once people are familiar with these, the group can provide training in platforms such as Doodle or ScoopIt for those who are interested.
Activity 6: Set up a Seed Fund

This activity provides the steps a network needs to set up and operate a seed or innovation fund. The purpose of such a fund is to encourage people to initiate collaborative, self-organized projects. A seed fund can be small - perhaps only $15,000 the first year - with grants from $250 - $2,000.

Directions:
Find two to three people to oversee the seed fund and approve proposals for funding. Individuals who fill this role need to be well-acquainted the network, well-regarded its participants, and cannot apply for funds.

Develop proposal guidelines (e.g. projects need to involve more than one organization, or you may want to emphasize youth involvement, etc.) and a short application, preferably less than one page. Google Forms is a great way to set up an online application that can be sent to everyone.

Publicize the fund. Establish a deadline when applications will be accepted. Most funds have a "first come, first served" policy.

If you have time, have the funding team ask questions and suggest ways for applicants to improve their proposals.

Try to inform the collaboratives quickly (within 1 month of application) if they have been approved.

Make sure all the participants from the approved projects agree to be part of a Community of Practice (CoP) that convenes regularly (i.e. once a month) to help each other and share what they are learning. Ask someone in the Community of Practice to capture key learnings from the COP and share them with the larger network.
Activity 7: Community of Practice

A Community of Practice (CoP) is a group of people who meets regularly (often virtually) to learn and practice new skills, and apply those practices to their work after the session. They also help each other with challenges that arise as they implement new practices and reflect on what they have done. This activity outlines the steps needed to establish a Community of Practice for people who want to gain additional network skills and are ready to help spread those skills throughout the network.

Directions:
A small group is needed to recruit participants, plan and communicate about the meetings, and facilitate the sessions. A Community of Practice generally has between 15 and 40 people and meets monthly. Often people commit to meeting for 6 to 9 months, and determine if they want to continue at the end of this time. More and more, CoPs meet virtually using a videoconferencing platform such as zoom.us, which enables the CoP to break into smaller groups who can work separately in multiple virtual meeting rooms.

One of the agenda items used by CoPs is a Peer Assist, a 15-30 minute full group activity. During the Peer Assist, a person presents their challenge to the group and invites CoP members to ask questions and provide advice as follows:

Step One: Person with the challenge outlines the challenge.

Step Two: CoP participants ask clarifying questions (e.g. What did you mean? Tell us more about...).

Step Three: CoP participants offer advice, resources, and thoughts.

Step Four: The presenter responds to questions and comments from the CoP participants, explains what they have learned from the advice, and outlines what s/he plans to do.

Step Five: The Peer Assist ends with a final go-around from participants who answer the question, “What did I learn from this discussion?”