



## **M219**

### **Network Learning: Develop Managers and Leaders, Activate Knowledge, and Improve Performance**

#### Learning Objectives:

- Organise and facilitate structured network initiatives in your organisation
- Activate tacit knowledge
- Create an atmosphere of confidence and encourage leaders to share knowledge acquired through successes and challenges
- Apply a more interactive approach to learning

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## Introduction

### **Network Learning: Develop Managers and Leaders, Activate Knowledge, and Improve Performance**

Networks can work wonders for your business. Why not improve leadership skills and management performance in your business through professional networks? Network learning is an interactive way of learning that activates the tacit knowledge in your business.

How does one create a learning environment where mutual learning takes place when leaders and managers meet? One solution is professionally facilitated networks. Business networks support knowledge sharing, best practice, inspiration, innovation, and sharing of experiences.

Moreover, networking can reduce misunderstandings between departments because the participants gain an understanding of the business as a whole. At the same time, they have an excellent opportunity to improve as leaders and managers because they learn from each other.

The kind of learning that takes place in a network is in many ways different from learning that takes place on courses with curricula. The network is a learning setup where a framework is provided by the facilitator, while the content is co-created and co-directed by the participants.

One of the unique strengths of network learning is that these professionally facilitated networks address problems of today and tomorrow - not of yesterday.



## **WHY are networks an advantageous way to embrace many challenges that contemporary organizations face?**

### **Leadership is a never-ending story:**

- The role of the leader is forever changing – new challenges arise and call for new solutions and responses
- The leader is required to be a role model – not only as a colleague, but also as a human being
- The leader is no longer best among peers – he knows less of the product/service than his employees
- Markets, competition, conditions are continuously changing
- Most leaders have been on loads of courses and workshops that focus on, e.g., management styles, situational leadership, typology, communication – all with defined learning topics and curricula
- Leaders are – so it seems - increasingly prone to succumb to stress and burnout

No course with a defined content can meet everyone's unique needs and specific organizational challenges.

The individual leader has a difficult role and is frequently under immense pressure and strain

– *bottom-up* to be a motivating leader and role model who is able to give employees relevant responses to all sorts of issues, work-related and sometimes also private ones.

– *top-down* to secure the bottom line and good financial results

Network learning has its starting point in the needs, interests and practices of the participants – not in a curriculum. Network learning is co-created by the participants. This is why network learning and discussions with peers can help create “reflecting practitioners” and – I suggest - better leaders.

A survey has shown that being able to spend time in networks with peers is clearly stress reducing.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (Vitalizing Networks - Leaders in networks – how relations contribute to helping leaders mastering the leadership role – (in Danish!), Kommunernes Landsforening 2002)



## Five golden rules of how to develop networks

### 1. Prepare – do your homework in the organization and with participants. Go for clarity of scope – and “buy in” from all levels

Clarify to yourself, your employees and other important stakeholders how the network can satisfy your particular needs and purpose and how you can contribute to the network in relation to:

- **The strategic level**
  - What is in it for the business; how will it contribute?
- **The leaders of the network participants**
  - What is in it for the boss/the department/the division: how will the leaders be expected to contribute?
- **The network participants**
  - What is in it for “me” as a leader. How will it enhance my leadership, contribute to my results and career.

**It is important to define the “playground”** for the network in order to avoid misunderstandings. A network does typically not have any formal power to make decisions – but to exchange views, knowledge and experiences. It is important that the participants don’t misunderstand the purpose of the network and believe it to be an opportunity to solely promote him or herself.

On the other hand, if you wish to provide the network with narrow and specific goals – then you better contemplate a more traditional course or workshop with a fixed curriculum.

### 2. Consider the makeup of the group

#### **The makeup of the network must enable giving and taking**

Successful networks require some sort of homogeneity among the participants. Leaders in the network groups should preferably be working at the same management level and level of decision making. One important aspect of network learning is to ensure an equal balance of giving and taking. Do not mix leaders at different levels in the same organization – it will hamper free exchange of views and experiences if leaders on one managerial level are in a networking group with leaders on the level above them. Diversity in all other ways is a virtue: Men/women, young/old, with theoretical/practical background.



### **3. Do not lead! Facilitate:**

**Co-create the ways of working with the participants – and let them provide the content!**

**A network consists of nodes and connections – or when speaking of human networks – of participants and their relations. But also of *information, knowledge and meaning*. What does it take to get the highest quality of all these? and to get all these valuable elements to function optimally in the network?**

**The facilitators role is to take maximum responsibility for the process, maximum responsibility for driving the network towards results, but minimum responsibility of the nature of the content**

A good facilitator will concentrate on all aspects of a network:

#### **The overall process:**

- Provider of framework and support,
- Expert on process – not content,
- Flexible and open about how to best use the time together to meet the group's expectations

#### **The participants:**

- Tirelessly working to empower participants to take responsibility for their own development and then the group's development
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#### **The relations:**

- Excellent in making others interrelate

#### **Information and knowledge:**

- Attentive and careful in helping speakers with their preparations before appearing before the group
- How many data, how much information or knowledge is necessary to make the network thrive? How should new members introduce themselves? How do you make it possible for the participants to pursue areas where they possess both knowledge and “non-knowledge”?

### **Meaning:**

- Transparent in the facilitator role
- Communicating (Introducing, reframing, questioning, summing up)
- Firm in the belief – and the communication - that the highest context, the very goal of the network, is to create “reflecting practitioners”
- Let participants provide the content – and ask them frequently what they get out of it and whether it “makes sense” and is meaningful.

### **4. Keep up the good work!**

**Networks need to be nourished. Some organisations believe that networks can be launched and then function on their own ever after. This is not the case.**

Networking groups should not be chosen as a means of organisational development because they are cheaper or can function all by themselves – but because they meet the organisation’s and the individual leader’s needs in a different way than does scheduled training. But networks need to be “nursed”.

Some, very mature groups, may be able to lead very productive lives of their own for a while – but once the main drivers of a network are too busy, fall ill, or leave the business, the network dies out. The network will most likely need a facilitator from the HR or training department or an external facilitator/consultant. An external consultant will often be prohibitively expensive. A viable idea, therefore, is to have an external consultant “kick start” the group, and then train some of the network participants to take on the facilitator’s role. This works really well (and the acquired facilitator skills are extremely helpful to leaders in their leadership role as well). However, regarding the network some administrative backup from HR or other sources is crucial.

### **5. Evaluate in an appreciative way that will help your results grow!**

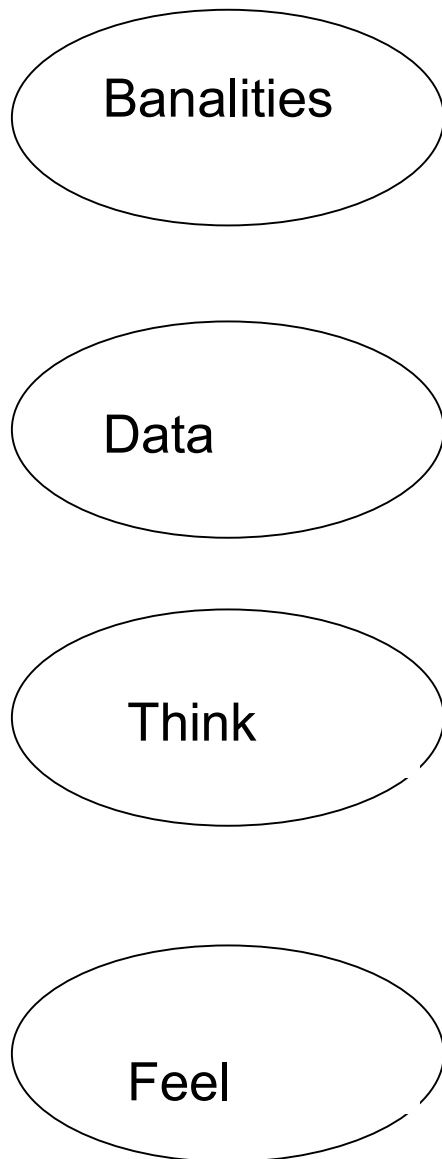
When evaluating, search for best experiences in the networking group and with reference to the goals set for the network activity.

Ask participants for information on facilitator’s best practice and ask participants about participants’ best experiences in the networking group. In addition ask them to evaluate their own best practice. Then, and only then, ask what could be done differently and how participants will contribute differently in the future.



## The four layers of dialogue

*How do you get "down to business"?*



*A little test:*

*What do you think is the easiest: Making people feel*

*"I get great value from this group"*

*"We have a high degree of confidence in this group"*

*"We are very good at providing coaching and sparring for each other"*

## The systemic approach to communication and learning – and applying the appreciative approach



**In systemic theory of communication**, communication is co-created in interaction between sender and receiver. The receiver may link to whatever is relevant for his or her experiences, needs or context. In social systems and in communicating experiences, there is no such thing as a "true" experience. An experience is to a person whatever he or she has experienced.

Discussing a challenge, a problem or a pursuit of a goal in a network group offers the leader other possible interpretations of his or her experiences and beliefs. Thus he or she is offered a possibility of considering other perspectives, which can be useful when solving conflicts, motivating colleagues or employees. Other perspectives and the opportunity to talk about *how we talk about things* are helpful means of becoming a "reflective practitioner".

The framework of the networking group should be **appreciative and recognizing**. *Not* in the sense of "praise" or "you rub my back and I'll rub yours"!!!. But with the firm acknowledgement that everybody is trying his or her uttermost to solve his/her tasks, to do the job and to meet the challenges. Sometimes these efforts have beneficial consequences – sometimes they are counterproductive. Feedback to network colleagues must always appreciate that the colleague is doing his/her best – and work with the issue from there

If a network colleague shares an important challenge with the network group it is a great learning opportunity – both for "owner" of the problem or challenge and for the rest of the group as they will all be able to reflect on the matter together.

The best learning often derives from real life challenges, i.e., non-finished issues, that have real value to it's owner.

The owner of the problem/challenge gets the opportunity to engage the wisdom of the entire network – and the network gets the opportunity to reflect on the case, as if they owned the problem/challenge.

And: Don't forget: Confidentiality is an absolute necessity – be open and honest with each other, but don't tell anybody outside the network about the challenges or performance of a network colleague.



## **Networks as beneficial for coping with stress**

Networks can create better working satisfaction and more efficiency. And they also contribute to the ability to cope with stress.

The following things are known factors which diminish stress and enhance stress coping.

- **practical help** (maybe borrowing of tools, maybe concrete help *"Do you want to see my concept of follow-up meetings? Do you want to see how I report progress, Do you want to hear about my activities to lower employee turnover?"* )
- **emotional support**, (*"I know that feeling – I've been there and I know it is thrilling/fantastic/awful."* *"I believe you have been dealing really well with this difficult situation".* *"Maybe you should not be so hard on yourself"*)
- **information support** (important information – *"Are you aware that there is a new government standard in this field?"* *"I just read this new book on... It has a fantastic analysis of..."*)
- **judgmental support** (feedback on tasks/ideas: *"This is a really good point, and if you improve your arguments on xxx, it will strengthen your presentation".* *"When I hear your arguments, I find that you have every reason to do feel confident, so try to let this confidence show more"*)
- **the feeling of belonging to a group** (*"I have this challenge too".* *"I know exactly what you mean!"*)

(Vitalizing Networks - Leaders in networks – how relations contribute to helping leaders mastering the leadership role – (in Danish!), Kommunernes Landsforening 2002)



## **References:**

### **Networks**

Siemens, George: Connectivism: Learning as Network-Creation – at [www.learningcircuits.org/2005/nov2005/Seimens.htm](http://www.learningcircuits.org/2005/nov2005/Seimens.htm) (yes it says “seimens”, not siemens!)

### **Learning in a changing world**

Christensen, Murry: Lies About Learners, in : Lies about Learning, Leading Executives Separate Truth from Fiction in a \$ 100 Billion Industry, Israelite, Larry (ed.), ASTD 2006

### **Learning in/and practice**

Donald Schön: The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action, Arena 1995

Donald Schon: "Educating the Reflective Practitioner" - presentation to the 1987 meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Washington, DC (Google: "Reflective Practitioner")

“People learn in communities”, interview with Wenger, Etienne in Asterisk, published by Danish Pedagogical University 2006

Lave J, Wenger E. Situated Learning, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1999

### **Systemic and appreciative/recognizing approach:**

... inspiration can be found with David Cooperrider, Axel Honneth, Humberto Maturana ...



## **Tips and tricks: First meeting**

### **When leaders (or new employees) meet in a networking group**

Use time for presentation – a thorough presentation – as interactively as possible. There are many "instruments" that can be used for this – how many presentation methods can you think of yourself?

Make the network group discuss their expectations of the work of the group – either 2x2, in triads or quartets?

"What are your expectations?"

"What are the values that should be underlying the work?"

"What are their challenges, as leaders of people – and meeting their business goals – who will contribute with a case?"

"Do you need tools to work with the challenges (knowledge of coaching, feedback et cetera?)"

What topics could be helpful?

What does the group expect from the facilitator?

Maybe you have chosen a topic for discussion on the basis of telephone or email conversations with the group – but make it clear that they will be in charge of deciding future topics. It is their network – not the facilitator's

End the meeting by a short discussion (2 and 2 or in the plenary session) on the theme: "What is the story you are going to tell in your department about this network and what you expect it to contribute?"



## **Tips and tricks:**

### **How to get operational once your network is up and running.**

*As facilitator you will get good results if you include these elements in a network meeting / season:*

*INSPIRATION* for the participants: theme or issue, preferably in the form of a case story from a participant or a relevant theme from an external source AND the processing of this information in the group

### *RELATION OF ALL TOPICS AND EXERCISES TO OWN PRACTICE\*:*

How can we make use of this? Does it make sense in the system around me? What does it take for me/us to make this relevant to or part of our practise

### *EXCHANGE OF EXPERIENCES*

Participants will learn lots more from each other than from you

### *SPARRING and SHARING OF KNOWLEDGE AND NON-KNOWLEDGE\**

There is no better or more convincing learning than being part in an interactive process on a case which is relevant, urgent to the presenter and where the network session can influence the outcome.

*NETWORKING or RELATIONBUILDING ACTIVITIES\*:* Two and two, three and three, dialogues, interviews, recognising interviews...

*INVOLVEMENT OF PARTICIPANTS\** – to the maximum

\* as a facilitator, these points must be closest to your heart. Nobody but you and a very mature and experienced network group will secure these things



## **Tips and tricks**

### **Evaluating**

#### **An example of appreciative evaluation:**

Contemplate: What have been your 2-3 best experiences during the last year in this network?

What have been the most helpful contributions from the facilitator?

What can the facilitator do in the future to improve the group's performance? (What would you like to see more of from the facilitator?)

What have been the most helpful contributions from the other participants?

What can the participants – including yourself - do in the future to improve the group's performance? (What would you like to see more of from the participants?)

Ideas for topics for the coming season / next meeting?

Cases/Challenges that you would like to contribute with to the next network meeting/the coming season?

Name (optional):



## **JOB AID**

### **Apply the 5 golden rules of forming networks**

1. Prepare – is the organisation ready?
2. Consider the makeup of the network – will participants be able to both give and take?
3. Do not lead – facilitate! Co-create the rituals and ways of working with the participants – and let them provide the content.
4. Keep up the good work
5. Evaluate

**Evaluation of workshop M219: Network Learning: Develop Managers and Leaders, Activate Knowledge, and Improve Performance – by Hanne V. Moltke, ATTRACTOR A/S, Denmark**

Contemplate: What have been your 2-3 best experiences during this workshop?

What have been the most helpful contributions from the facilitator?

If there were another workshop, what could the facilitator do improve the group's performance?

What have been the most helpful contributions from the participants?

If there were another workshop what could the the participants (including yourself) do to improve the workshop?

Other ideas that might improve future workshops?

Ideas for topics you would like to see covered in a workshop?

Name (optional):