

**Building Networks –
a theoretical, practical and personal perspective
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Introduction

I have been asked to speak to you today about developing networks. I intend to touch briefly on both the theoretical and the practical dimensions, as well as giving a personal view. But before I do, I will begin by telling you a bit about Better Government for Older People (BGOP); its history, who we are, and what we do.

BGOP came into being as a result of five years of research, policy analysis and development undertaken in the early nineties by the Warwick University Local Authorities Research Consortium, examining the challenges posed to local authorities by the ageing of the population, or the “silver tide”, as Sir Stewart Sutherland rather more poetically put it. In 1997 the Cabinet Office joined with the key players, and the focus broadened to encompass national government and public services in general.

Together they designed a two year action research programme, which they called “Better Government for Older People”. Its initial aim was to improve public services for older people by:

- better meeting their needs;
- listening to their voices; and, crucially,
- recognising their contribution.

The idea was to test out imaginative and innovative approaches, which would cut across different tiers of government, different departments and services, and different spheres of organisation (the public, private, voluntary and community sectors).

28 pilot sites were chosen across the UK. During the pilot phase, from 1998 to 2000, there were frequent opportunities for the “Learning Network”, the pilots and other interested organisations, to meet, to learn from each other and to share ideas and practice.

A very robust monitoring and evaluation framework was put in place, using a formative, developmental model, whereby the national evaluators at the University of Warwick worked closely with local evaluators in each pilot area.

The Network, as it is now called, was one of two elements to continue as part of the national programme, now based in London, beyond the pilot phase; the other being the UK Older People’s Advisory Group. Membership of this group, which had originally been drawn from older people involved in the pilots, is now drawn from the three devolved nations and from the nine English regional development areas.

Three of the original pilots were in Scotland. They were deemed so successful that a separate evaluation report was published jointly by BGOP and the then Scottish Executive. However, as is so often the case, despite a glowing evaluation, there was no further investment in Scotland for five years.

The two years ago I was seconded from my position as project manager of the South Lanarkshire BGOP partnership to become the Scottish Co-ordinator. Determined not to duplicate existing activity, I initially spent a great deal of time talking to people working in the field of ageing in Scotland. The strong message I received was that there was a dearth of the kind of networking opportunities which had been so valued during the pilot phase.

Networks and neutral space

Morton Warner and Nick Gould at the Welsh Institute for Health and Social Care at the University of Glamorgan have done some interesting thinking around the concept of “networks”.

They point out that the current trend towards organisations working together has resulted in a plethora of different expressions: joint ventures, strategic alliances, public private partnerships, coalitions, consortia, private finance initiatives, franchising, action sets, task groups, virtual organisations; the list is endless. This profusion reflects the fact that the type of joint working described may differ depending on a number of factors, including timescales, geographic location, and the nature of the task. They suggest that “network” is the most general – and powerful – term, because, while all partnerships can be considered to be networks, the reverse is not true.

It seems to me that, in general, what we think of as “joint working” is focused on service delivery; partnerships tend to be formal and well-defined; whereas networks can be much looser and more fluid, and less constrained by time, place and size. This does not mean, however, that they cannot be agents of change.

In order to make sense of such a potentially all-purpose category, Warner and Gould describe a developing consensus that there are three ways of understanding “networks”. These are: entity; analytic and approach to organisation.

“Network as entity” encapsulates such things as the rail network; the Internet; and networks of friends. “Network analysis” offers a way of showing the underlying pattern of relationships in a group of people. But perhaps the most useful for our purpose today is the idea of the network approach to organisation.

A network has some similarities with a self-managed team. Responsibility is shared, and there are high levels of mutual respect, trust and commitment.

Clearly, this is something of an ideal, and in order to attain this ideal, there are a number of barriers which need to be overcome, or rather, as Warner and Gould prefer, boundaries which need to be spanned. They suggest that, as metaphors, barriers connote the impenetrable, or at least resistance to access or change; whereas boundaries can be more elastic or permeable, allowing possibilities of adjustment, diffusion or exchange.

Whatever the language we use, the challenges posed may include: financial considerations, procedural and structural issues, and issues of professional boundaries, status and legitimacy.

They developed a visual metaphor of “white (or neutral) space”, which is the empty space between the organisations which will come together in a network, and which offers the potential for inter-organisational, inter-professional or inter-sectoral interaction and learning. What people bring into the space might include experience, knowledge, resources and an open mind. What they are asked to leave outside might include assumptions, prejudices, and other kinds of baggage. To generate this neutral space, Warner and Gould postulated three processes: attracting, guiding and brokering.

Attracting people into the space requires giving people good reasons to devote their time and energy to entering it; creating “buy-in”. Guiding is about giving direction and purpose to the enterprise as people begin the journey; about finding solutions to problems and creating opportunities. Brokerage is about co-ordination and negotiation as the network develops.

What all three processes have in common is the need to develop relationships. To enable this to happen, they have developed a role they call a “virtual organisation co-ordinator”, who is responsible for the three processes and for developing relationships with and between the organisations and the people within them who will be members of the network.

A practical tool

One practical tool which could be used in the development of a network is the Scottish national standards for community engagement. The standards were developed to improve both the understanding and the practice of community engagement. This is defined as, “developing and sustaining a working relationship between one or more public body and one or more community group, to help them both to understand and act on the needs or issues that the community experiences”. While not every indicator would apply, the standards themselves, which cover involvement, support, planning, methods, working together, sharing information, working with others, improvement, feedback and monitoring and evaluation, could be readily adapted into a simple checklist for anyone developing – or assessing the effectiveness of – a network. The key elements of working and learning together and of mutual understanding and respect are the same.

A personal view

As I have been told that “stories are hot in academe” I will finish with a couple of examples from my own work. Through reading some of the literature, I have learned that I work as a “boundary spanner”. This role, although implicit, enables me not only to build networks, but also to create links between networks.

I have deliberately used the phrase, “building networks”; I could equally have talked about “growing networks”. In my experience, network development is both intentional and organic. When I first established what is now the Financial Awareness and Older People Network (which is still in need of a snappier title!), I simply called a meeting of people I knew who I thought might have an interest in the subject. About a dozen people attended. Most of those people were able immediately

to suggest other people or organisations who should also be around the table. At that time, I was still working as project manager in South Lanarkshire, and had little time to devote to such national tasks. The group met occasionally, and very much appreciated the opportunity to find out what was happening in other organisations and other parts of Scotland. However, it is only in the past two years that it has been possible to put the network on a firmer footing. It is now hosted here at Queen Margaret University, and we are developing promotional literature. What has happened in the meantime is that the network has continued to grow. The mailing list is now well over a hundred strong. There is a core of perhaps a dozen people who attend six meetings a year, and an outer core of perhaps another thirty who attend occasionally, depending on topic and availability. For the others it is a two-way information exchange. We are now looking at ways, using the promotional literature and other means, of attracting into the network groups, such as older people themselves, who are currently under-represented. But already, the group is seen as a useful voice in the field of financial inclusion, which has traditionally been focused on younger people.

I was able to take a rather more focused approach to the development of an intergenerational network in Scotland. We had a flying start, as there had been a network some years ago, which had folded because of a lack of funding. The initial meeting, in March 2007, attracted well over twenty people, all of whom were very keen to be involved in quarterly meetings to share news, experience, views, ideas and opportunities.

The level of enthusiasm meant that there was little need for boundary spanning; and an opportunity arose almost immediately for the network to have an impact. The new Scottish Government adopted the main funding commitments of 'All Our Futures: planning for a Scotland with an ageing population', one of which was the establishment of a Scottish Centre for Intergenerational Practice'. A group of people from the network submitted an ideas paper to the government, were asked to submit a proposal, and in October became the advisory group to the new centre. One of the main roles of the centre, which is now called 'Generations Working Together', is to develop local practitioner networks; effectively a network of networks.

I hope that these two examples illustrate some of the main things that we need to think about when setting out on the journey to build a network.

Conclusions

The key elements in a successful and effective network have to be commitment, relationships and trust. These take time to develop, but they create the bedrock on which it is possible to:

- agree clear joint expectations and a shared purpose;
- create a shared culture of openness, honesty and sharing;
- recognise and respect difference, both in circumstances, such as professional status and in views held;

- challenge assumptions, prejudices, stereotypes and even simple misunderstandings;
- address the challenges posed by organisations' natural inclination towards independence and preserving traditional territory;
- overcome resistance and create a sense of joint ownership;
- share experience, knowledge, skills and ideas;
- develop new understandings and agendas; and
- build the capacity of members to respond to opportunities and to create change.

It will be apparent from the above that creating an effective network is not a simple task, but it is a very worthwhile one. Networks need leadership, not management. They have the capacity to 'reframe' the way we tackle issues, and to build the capacity of members. By harnessing a multiplicity of resources and energies, a network can offer much more than the sum of its parts to its members, to decision-makers, and to society at large.