Developing Network Perspective: Social Networks and Leadership

Key Concept
Are you aware of the different roles individuals play in your organization, and how they connect to each other to form an informal structure that supports the organization as a whole? If so, you are well on your way to developing network perspective — something that is, according to this Idea, imperative for 21st century executives.

Idea Summary
Though formal hierarchies continue to be an integral part of organizational structures, in recent years individuals have been required to look beyond these towards the informal and invisible structures supporting an organization. This is referred to as ‘network perspective’ in a 2013 White Paper by the Center for Creative Leadership’s Kristin Cullen, Charles Palus and Craig Appaneal. Network perspective is the ability to look beyond formal, designated relationships and see the complex web of connections between people in and beyond an organization.

According to Cullen, Palus and Appaneal, there are several reasons why developing network perspective is imperative for 21st-century executives; for example, work often happens through informal channels, outside of formal reporting and working relationships, and complex challenges in the workplace cannot be addressed by individuals alone. They can only be solved by groups of people working collaboratively across boundaries (i.e. hierarchies, regions, functions, etc.). Moreover, network knowledge can be a strong asset in change efforts, as activating informal networks can help accelerate change.

In order to gain network perspective, however, individuals must first conduct a network analysis. This is the process of getting useful, accurate information about your organization’s network by looking at the connections between people. Individual roles that may be identified during a network analysis can include the following:

- **Central connectors**: these are key connectors and influencers, and therefore important to execution, innovation and successful organizational change. As such, they can also put an organization in a vulnerable spot if they leave.
- **Peripheral players**: these have few network connections and may appear isolated, and can include newcomers, specialists and even some high-performers who work most effectively on the fringe.
- **Brokers**: these hold the network together and control information flow, connecting people who might otherwise be disconnected.
- **Boundary spanners**: these are critical to gathering and transferring information from disparate parts of the organization, and tend to hold a great deal of power. However, this role

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Institutions
› Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®)

Source
› CCL® White Paper

Idea conceived
March 2013

Idea posted
January 2014

DOI number
10.13007/291

Subject
› Organizational Structure
› Leadership
› Organizational Effectiveness
› Networking
› Social Media
can often be burdensome on the occupier of it, and they can also often go unrecognized within the organization.

- **Energizers**: these create energy and excitement in their interpersonal interactions. People around them tend to learn more, demonstrate greater creativity and innovation, and report more satisfaction with their jobs.

### Business Application

There is no doubt that in today's interdependent and highly-connected business world, executives have to communicate and coordinate across geographies, functions, levels and organizational borders to achieve success; developing network perspective in order to effectively do so is crucial.

One of the key features of network perspective is being able to ‘zoom’ in and out to different levels of social interaction. In order to understand this, executives should think of network perspective as a powerful zoom lens — like Google Maps for the connectedness of your workplace; you can use Google Maps to zoom out from a specific location to the neighbourhood, the country and even several countries.

Similarly, if you only consider the individuals you are directly connected to, you are missing the larger picture (i.e. how you and your group fit within the larger organizational community and how you are tied to other organizations, locations, people and perspectives around the world). Zooming out in this way helps to provide a more robust network perspective.

### Further Reading


### Further Relevant Resources

- Kristin L. Cullen’s profile at the Center for Creative Leadership
- Charles J. Palus’s profile at the Center for Creative Leadership
- Center for Creative Leadership’s profile at IEDP