

Appendix 2. Networks, Self-Organizing, Breakthroughs and Scale: A Case Study

In 1992, quite a few truck farmers had been dropping in at the ACEnet office and asking what we could do to help them. They weren't making enough money from selling their vegetables at the farmers' market and wanted to make value-added products, but that required a licensed facility. For a single business, this could cost several hundred thousand dollars.

A few months later, the importance of attending conferences to bump into innovators was brought home to me when I attended a National Business Incubation Association conference where I sat down for lunch and met Verona LaMunyon. Now Verona, with her puffy hair and polka dot dress, was no one's idea of an innovator, but what she had developed was nothing short of revolutionary! Thank goodness I had the sense to listen to what she had to say.

She had gotten access to the kitchen space in an old army base and converted it into something she called *a Kitchen Incubator*. This was a licensed processing facility where start-up entrepreneurs could rent the use of ovens or bottling equipment to produce their creative food products. Light bulbs went off in my head: instead of struggling to help each entrepreneur raise a lot of money, we could set up a Kitchen Incubator that could help hundreds of entrepreneurs manufacture products with virtually no start-up costs!

Over the next 3 years, we convened dozens of *joint design sessions* to help us develop every aspect of the facility, from the kinds of equipment to the use of space. Each design group met only a few times. Each was composed of a unique set of farmers, entrepreneurs and resource people with needs, passions and/or know how targeted at one specific issue.

The equipment design group, for example, included staff from The Ohio State University Food Science Department and the head of Ohio University Food Service, while the Incubator Services group included the manager of the local grocery store who shared information about selling products at his store.

In addition to their design functions, we saw these sessions as powerful *network weaving* opportunities: during breaks we encouraged farmers to discuss selling their produce to Ohio University and the grocery chain, and these initial relationships opened the door for many future opportunities.

So the network ACEnet nurtured, from the beginning:

- built on the *opportunities* represented by existing farmer/entrepreneurs and their desire to do more
- reached out to *innovators* from other parts of the country to get inspiration and breakthrough ideas
- wove the network by engaging people in *self-organized design groups* and encouraging them to explore common interests

Questions

1. How can the initiatives undertaken grow from opportunities we see rather than from problems we encounter?
2. How can we be more open to innovators? How can we find innovators who have ideas that can help us make breakthrough?
3. How can we build networks through small encounters that help people get to know each other, identify common interests and build trust?

Be Rhizomatic!

Once completed, the Food Ventures Center enabled hundreds of individuals – many of them low-resourced – to start successful food processing businesses. Unlike many microenterprise training programs, however, the ACEnet staff felt they were not training the entrepreneurs so much as developing a full life cycle relationship with them, continually changing services provided to enable tiny start-ups to continue to expand throughout the years and becoming peers and partners on an ongoing stream of collaborative projects.

In addition, staff acted more as Network Weavers --connecting entrepreneurs to other entrepreneurs and to resource people -- than as trainers. If a person needed help with the recipe for their product, staff were as likely to refer them to Matt Rappocelli, a baker and food artist who volunteered his time to help people improve the quality of their products. If they wanted to buy jars for their salsa, staff connected them to Craig Cornett, the owner of Frog Ranch Salsa, who ordered jars by the truckload and resold them to newbies for a small mark-up.



The image that fits this type of entrepreneurship development is that of a huge chunk of ginger. Ginger is a rhizome; that is, it has underground roots that sprout many additional roots. **Each root bud has the nutrients to create many other buds, and those buds then help even more buds sprout.** If the original bud dies for some reason, the newly sprouted root buds will continue to survive and flourish. In the same way, ACEnet and the Food Ventures Center sprouted many buds, which in turn, created many more sprouts throughout the region. This amplified the impact of ACEnet – a relatively small organization – many times over.

ACEnet spent five months in 1985 helping a small group form Casa Nueva, a worker-owned Mexican restaurant. Because the business was owned by all who worked there, each worker/owner had to learn to read financial statement and many took a turn at managing some aspect of restaurant operations. In a sense, worker/owners received the equivalent of an MBA on the job, and not surprisingly a substantial number of them (almost 3 dozen at last count) went on

to start businesses of their own. My favorite networking spot – Village Bakery and Café – was one of those ginger root sprouts started by two former Casa worker/owners.

Once Village Bakery was successfully underway, they started a pizza place next door to the café, then started selling the products of dozens of local businesses in their restaurant. Recently, they helped initiate the Staple Foods Collaborative which is convincing local farmers to grow heirloom corn and beans to sell to local restaurants. Three more buds are sprouting from the café root! This kind of viral impact can make a huge difference in a community's economy.

Questions

- 1. How can everything you do create something that continues to contribute to the community?*
- 2. How can your organization become more rhizomatic? How can the individuals, organizations and projects*

Networks Among and Between

Meanwhile, the power of building networks among businesses was revealed when a set of area restaurants – a number of them owned by former Casa worker-owners who stayed in touch – formed the Athens Independent Restaurant Owners Association. Casa Nueva was firmly committed to building a local food economy and purchased most of their raw materials from local farmers. So, not surprisingly they convinced others in the association to increase their purchases of locally grown items and introduced them to area truck farmers. This multi-million dollar demand created a substantial new opportunity and some of the community gardeners became entrepreneur/farmers. More sprouts.

The association also began to work closely with the tourism bureau, concocting a string of new celebrations for the downtown. One of these was Ohio Brew Week, where microbreweries from all over the state brought their wares to Athens. Restaurants vied for prizes for delectable dishes made from the beers and made small fortunes selling Brew Week T-shirts and other memorabilia. It's interesting to note that the association also made sure that small vendors selling food and locally made jewelry and crafts, opening opportunities for budding entrepreneurs to try out a business with low risk and in some cases high reward. And, in addition, this recurring event has basically jump-started a microbrew sector in the southeastern part of the state. More sprouts likely to create more sprouts.

Questions

- 1. How can we create networks among sets of organizations or businesses?*
- 2. How can organizations begin to work with others in ways that create new opportunities for them, for the communities and for those less fortunate?*

Comparing Networks and Organizational Lenses

Most organizations are like trees. They can grow very large but they are also vulnerable – once they are chopped down, that’s it. They’re gone.



Contrast this to a bamboo forest. Each bamboo can grow larger, but the interesting thing is that if you feed one bamboo some extra fertilizer, the huge network of rhizomes that connect all the plants in that forest will cart some of that nutrient off to other plants. And, if one of the bamboo stalks is chopped down, nutrients from the network will be available so that another sprout can form to fill that vacuum. Now the network of bamboo doesn’t all get together for a meeting to decide how to share. The flow, the structure of the network, is such that it supports the distribution of resources.

Network Weavers

The secret sauce, the secret structure of networks that makes them work so well, is the role of **Network Weaver**. A Network Weaver is a person who takes responsibility for making networks work. The first misunderstanding that people have about Network Weavers is that it’s a job. I think it’s a real mistake to hire a Network Weaver – I think our goal ought to be to help everyone become a Network Weaver.

NETWORK WEAVER ROLES



Lots of people are natural Network Weavers and when they take the Network Weaver Checklist they get very excited and feel tremendously validated. They want to learn more and build their skills at Network Weaving – and we need to find ways to support that.

People are just starting to realize that the term Network Weaver is an umbrella term, and contains a number of different sub-roles. Four I've identified are Connector, Project Coordinator, Network Guardian and Network Facilitator (see chart on following page).

The first – Connector/Catalyst – is one that makes sense given the word “weaver” in the title: Network Weavers connect people.

Network Weavers as Connectors

Network Weavers see two people in a room and they immediately start thinking, “What do these folks have in common?” Well, they can only know the answer if they've had time to listen to both the individuals and find out their gift and needs and challenges. So it's important that we make sure people have time in their busy schedules to listen to people.

Network Weavers may just set up situations where people can connect on their own, informally. This may be at informal dinners, or making sure that meetings have long breaks so people can talk to each other long enough to get to know what they have in common. Or, Network Weavers build up Networking Hubs – places such as the Food Ventures Center or Village Bakery – where people naturally congregate. Network Weavers will hang out at such places and model weaving behavior, relentlessly talking to people who come in and introducing them to others around some specific interest. As a result, more people hang out there, and it becomes a place to go to find out the latest news and meet new people.

Network Weavers also connect people to resources: people with special skills or expertise or capital. By doing this, they open new opportunities for people: farmers become processors, and restaurants become manufacturers.



And finally, Network Weavers ask people to help out. They know that most people love to share a skill or a ride or whatever with someone else – Network Weavers just suggest a concrete situation where their help is needed.

The particular way that Network Weavers do all this connecting – pointing out the importance of giving back when you get – creates that dense mat of resources underlying the bamboo forest, a network where the resources one needs to take the next step are only a relationship or two away and are primed to move your way.

Questions

- 1. How have you been a Network Weaver Connector?*
- 2. Who else do you know who is a natural Network Weaver?*

Network Weavers and Self-organizing Networks

A lot of people are convening large groups of people who care about the same thing – housing, green jobs, etc. – and forming a Network. My experience is that you have to be very careful about this structuring of networks as many formally organized Networks I’ve seen devolve into yet another organization with lots of overhead and the kind of confusion about decision-making that makes them anything but quick acting and innovative. However, they certainly are very effective in some situations (see discussion and case studies in Network Weaver Handbook).

Another way to look at the structure of networks is to make visible another invisible part of the network, which is its capacity to self-organize. **Self-organization** occurs when a person or set of people (sometimes a very large set) see something that they think could make a difference, and because they are embedded in this vast bamboo forest network, are able to pull together the resources to make something happen. It’s often something short-term and experimental – testing the waters so to speak. And after that something happens people take time to reflect and examine what they did and figure out why it worked (or in many cases why it didn’t work).

In Appalachian Ohio, there are thousands and thousands of self-organized actions every year and it has led to the creation of a wonderful community. But before we go through examples of this self-organizing action, it’s essential to stress the critical role of the Network Weaver as Project Coordinator and Catalyst of Self-organization in making the shift in culture and behavior that enables self-organizing to take off and transform communities.

Network Weavers are continually encouraging people to form what I call **twosies** – two people deciding to do something, usually very small, together. For example, a Network Weaver noticed two entrepreneurs who were both trucking their home grown products to markets an hour and a half away and suggested that they might consider taking turns on deliveries so each could spend more time making product. This worked out well, but the Network Weaver didn’t stop there. She then suggested that the two were doing so well that they might consider starting a distribution business and taking other farmer/entrepreneurs’ products to distant markets. Network Weavers are continually looking for ways to make self-organized actions rhizomatic – helping people convert simple actions, when they work, into resources for the larger network.

From Project Coordinator to Coach of Project Coordinators

Generally Network Weavers catalyze the self-organizing process by coordinating several joint actions themselves, playing the role we call Project Coordinator. But the practice of self-organizing will spread very quickly if the Network Weavers explicitly model and train and coach others in the skills and processes needed to lead an effective joint project. And, at some point, these self-organized groups begin to manage themselves as a group with leadership by all.

However, when self-organized projects include people from different organizations, it’s hard to develop accountability and communication. Simple project management worksheets and websites can make both accountability and communication transparent. Spending the time to show people in small projects how to use web-based platforms can dramatically increase the successful implementation of joint actions.

Questions

- 1. Have you ever initiated a collaborative self-organized project? A twosie?*
- 2. How could you help a project you know about become rhizomatic?*

Network Guardians, Building Systems of Support

A key to regional transformation is when **networks of social enterprises** (which can be non-profits, for-profits, government agencies, associations and foundations who are committed to building effective networks) begin to take responsibility for developing network structures and processes. When they play this role they are acting as Network Guardians – those who stand back and notice the patterns and roadblocks of the network as a whole. As Network Guardians, they often take responsibility for developing some aspect of the system of support that effective networks require.

These include development of Network Weavers. Often this process starts by providing some training to people who see themselves as Network Weavers and want to learn more. However, this is most effectively done combined with actual practice in Network Weaver with feedback by coach. If this clinic approach is done in a peer group setting, then the group quickly evolves into a Community of Practice capable of providing peer support for all those involved and organizing more in-depth training. This type of training/coaching occurred several times in Appalachian Ohio, though a formal Community of Practice was not developed.

Another example of a network structure is the network's communication system. The more opportunities that are created for interaction, engagement and self-organizing, the more the network will take off. Increased communication can happen by word of mouth when people in the network are well-connected, through group emails and mobilizing the Food Venture Center as a networking hub, or the network can make use of the wonderful proliferation of Web 2.0/ social media platforms that can support every aspect of network building.

The third key leg of the network support stool is to re-structure funding streams so that they support self-organizing not just organizations. A joint project in the Appalachian area set up an Innovation Fund that provides quick access to small seed funds for innovative, exploratory projects that involved some combination of entrepreneurs, area non-profits and other support organizations. Projects that were successes were then given assistance to find sufficient funds for full implementation.

Questions

- 1. Do your networks have adequate communication systems? Are you utilizing social media to help people engage and collaborate? What do you need to move ahead in this arena?*



Opportunity Areas

Another way that Network Guardians support network development is by catalyzing Opportunity Areas. Opportunity Areas are ways to focus energy on a larger scale than a single self-organized project but provide more concreteness and building power than focusing generically on a region or large issue. An example is focusing on the opportunities in clusters such as local foods or green jobs.. Focusing on neighborhoods or small communities is another. Sometimes you might convene a group and ask them to identify an area where they see a real difference could be made; sometimes someone identifies an opportunity and convinces others to join in developing that opportunity. The Opportunity Area becomes the focal point that weaves many small projects together so they add up.

Albany Ohio, a dying village of a few hundred, saw its Opportunity Area as the pawpaw, a local wild fruit. Every year, the village partners with others around the region to stage the dearly beloved Pawpaw Festival. Organizing this festival was a highly effective way of building the skills of many people in the village who used those skills to regenerate the village and start businesses. In addition, the festival generated an endless stream of rhizomatic self-organizing initiatives.

For example, the festival had a contest to select the best tasting pawpaws – which encouraged area people to think about upgrading the plants of their land. Superior species were offered for sale at the festival so that more product was available to meet the demand. The demand was created by small manufacturers in the area, who were encouraged to develop innovative pawpaw products by another contest at the festival. Products such as pawpaw chutney, pawpaw ice cream and pawpaw microbrew became part of businesses' expanded product lines as a result of wins for those products at the festival.

Questions

1. What Opportunity Areas has your network already identified?
2. How could you support self-organizing in that Opportunity Area?

Scale and Impact

By 2004, there was a well-developed food economy in the region – but what about the rest of the economy? For transformation to occur, communities need both focus – which we described in the last section – and expansiveness. An example of this expansiveness occurred in Nelsonville, which in 2004 was a former coal mining town with gorgeous Victorian storefronts that were almost all empty and boarded up. One brave couple decided to build on the hundred-year history of brick making in the region by opening a gallery for artists working in clay. Soon the wife of one of the owners of an international business located in the town decided to open a coffee shop which quickly became a major network hub especially for staff from nearby Hocking College,

especially their super Network Weaver Paul Harper and the owners of Starbrick Clay, the gallery. Somehow, through interactions between these folks and others, the café owner made an offer that any art or craft related business that wanted to locate in the square would get a year of subsidized rent. As business moved in, Hocking College's culinary arts program opened a gourmet restaurant, and the regional foundation moved in down the street.



After less than two years, most of the storefronts were filled with delightful stores ranging from a do-it-yourself pottery shop to a quilting store. But how to get them to work together? A small collaboration called AORIC, which included the foundation, decided to set up an Innovation Fund of \$15,000 that gave out several dozen small grants over the next two years. One of those helped the businesses start Final Fridays – a celebration the last Friday of each month to get people to come to visit the local shops. One important rhizomatic feature of Final Fridays was that it provided very low-cost vending space for local entrepreneurs and many low-income residents were able to supplement their income from the money they earned on this one

evening. Another helped 25 of the businesses design and produce a walking tour guide that was distributed to area Bed and Breakfasts and regional tourism bureaus.

Still the group of businesses was not able to convince the local city council to support their marketing efforts. The council was having a hard time giving up their dream of luring a manufacturing plant to the area and wasn't convinced that art was real economic development. Serendipitously, ACEnet was part of a national learning cluster that consisted of some of the most innovative and successful artisan, tourism and food sector projects in the country. We brought these groups to Nelsonville for a training program, but invited the city council to hear stories of the successes and impacts of the groups. Several weeks later the council agreed to support marketing efforts of the Nelsonville Square. The Square is now a wonderful success – giving pride to the region, income to the entrepreneurs and tax revenues to the city.



National Learning Clusters

Looking at the success of the Nelsonville initiative, we realized it represented a new breakthrough in the form of a metacluster – since food businesses worked with artisan businesses, retail stores, tourism bureaus as well as with local government and educational

institutions. We called the metacluster strategy Regional Flavor, and with the support of the Kellogg Foundation, selected 6 organizations already experimenting in the same domain, and formed a learning cluster.

With this cluster, we experimented with using ning.com – a customizable social networking site – for network conversations. We coached the groups, helping them load up pictures and complete a personal profile. We put documents and meeting minutes on the site, and the groups populated it with photos of their projects and our joint meetings. After a while several of the groups set up ning sites for their regional projects as well.

The projects explored ultra- innovative strategies. The Arkansas Delta project developed a regional brand – but then let communities and birding trails and music festivals develop their own version of the brand, riffing off the main brand in charming variety. The speed with which successes of one project flowed into the others was astounding. Arkansas took the idea of the Kitchen Incubator from ACEnet combined it with the Regional Flavor concept and started a Regional Flavor Incubator that, in addition to food processors, would support businesses such as a canoe livery and a period renovation operation. The network from the Lake Erie Grape region captured the idea of a regional brand from Arkansas. The Colorado region snatched the idea of becoming a heritage area from the grape region and Nelsonville learned how (and successfully applied) to become a Main Street project from Arkansas.

The most exciting rhizomatic feature of this learning cluster came when the group decided their next step would be to take Regional Flavor on the road, sharing the concept and practice in Discovery Sessions around the country. The first pilot Discovery session was held in North Central Minnesota where five of the groups shared key successes and how to's with the sixth group – White Earth Reservation – that wanted to expand their network to include non-native groups. More than 75 people – most of whom had never worked together before – spent a day hearing from the Regional Flavor Projects and then, after going through the Opportunity Process, working in action groups to get the new, expanded initiative moving forward.

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