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Never More Alone, Never More Together: Paradoxes of Working in Networks

By Kris Cummings

This is the fifth and final article in our series about the role of networks in the non-profit sector. The series is published as a collaboration between The Philanthropist and the Ontario Nonprofit Network.

One of the most insightful and intelligent people I have known passed away recently, and she once told me that we can never go back to something that once was, but we can continue or persist with a purpose and intention, learning and adapting as we go. What I take from this is that we have a tendency to be hesitant or resistant during times of change, casting our gaze backwards with the perfect clarity of hindsight – and wishing to recreate something seemingly simpler from the past, whether in our lives, our politics, or our organizational strategy. It's of course good to learn from our past, but impossible to recreate it as time and circumstances change. Her insight seems like a quote from Greek philosopher Heraclitus that pops up every now and then, that "some things stay the same only by changing." In other words, applied to the topic of this article, our purpose can remain consistent, but we need to adjust our approach to continue serving our missions effectively.

Networks have emerged as a transformational adaptation to a continually-changing community service environment characterized by complex social and economic issues, and the needs of a diverse population. Community Benefit Organizations (CBOs) can realize the advantages of a collaborative network's greater scope and agility to keep pace with change, maintain responsiveness and relevance of service for stakeholders, and build support for their work and missions. Realizing this potential isn't automatic, however, and requires adaptation both in strategy, as well as the ways that CBOs organize their work as networks.

A review of literature, underscored with the experiences of current CBO network leaders, reveals that networks require key capacities for networked governance and management of complex change. Networked governance enables networks to define common purpose, make decisions, act in a coordinated manner, and gather support for a broad scope of potential. In turn, managing complex change enables networks to carry that common purpose forward and match strategy to changing trends and the needs of stakeholders, through shared agility for continuous adaptation. These capacities are found to be supported by common foundational abilities and behaviour. Taken together, these capacities, and the abilities and behaviours through which they are carried-out, provide the means for

networks to realize their greater scope and agility to create community benefit.

From tracing the emergence of networks and their key capacities, this article highlights tensions that may undermine collaborative efforts, including a sense of trade-off between individual organizational missions and network purpose; the perception of change as a risk to be minimized in favour of sustainable structures; and a fear that engaging stakeholders with a network's purpose will redirect support away from the individual organization. Insights are drawn from literature and the leaders of three networks to illuminate how these tensions can be cast-off by building specific:

- Mindsets to integrate organizational missions with larger network purpose, harness change as a creative force to sustain performance, and share leadership and engagement broadly to build support for the work of networks and organizations alike;
- Practices for reciprocal relationships, shared leadership and engagement, decision-making and action, systems and complexity thinking, and managing complex change; and
- Environmental factors through the efforts of funders and sector-building organizations joining networks as partners and transforming past bureaucratic and competitive systems to foster cooperative, adaptive, and relational approaches.

These mindsets, practices, and environmental factors can enable collaborative networks to produce the community benefit that we're counting on the sector to provide our communities.

Networks as an adaptive change to the community service environment

We know non-profits as purpose-driven organizations that provide community benefit through strategies that respond to social, economic, and other trends in the community environment (Kramer, 2018; Mollenhauer, 2017; Bodwell and Chermack, 2010). The key is responsiveness and, not surprisingly, progressive CBOs adjust their strategies and the structures (e.g. hierarchies, organizations, partnerships, etc.) that enable them, to suit changes in their environment and remain relevant to their stakeholders' needs (Wolf, 2011; Burnes, 2005). Adaptation has become increasingly important in today's environment of quickly shifting social, funding, policy, and economic conditions, combined with unpredictable outcomes linked to complex social issues (Benington, 2011; Bodwell and Chermack, 2010; Burnes, 2005). CBOs need to adapt to a growing mix of urgent, emergent, and enduring needs simultaneously, but this isn't easy after decades of austerity, control-biased systems, and lean process thinking. CBOs are stretched thin and struggle to adapt quickly, and CBO leaders can feel an overwhelming and isolating sense of responsibility to find solutions for their individual organizations, even while participating in a volume of collaboration like nothing in recent memory.

The ways in which CBOs approach change matter more and more. In common with the public and private sectors, CBOs have relied upon bureaucratic and business-like leadership and management practices, and their associated planned and incremental approaches to change (Benington, 2011). Within the context of the current environment, however, literature on change suggests the public goods and consumer choice of bureaucratic and private market approaches fail to address the complexity of the social issues (e.g. intergenerational poverty) facing society (Kramer, 2018; Benington, 2011; Stoker, 2006). While bureaucracies effectively mass-produce standardized services – and private markets successfully respond to the immediate needs of the population as consumers – they are too rigid and risk-averse to keep pace with complex and shifting social needs of diverse populations (Benington, 2011).

Further, these models seek to maintain equilibrium – in the case of non-profits, often the sustainability of the organization’s structures and the consistency of its established community services – in alignment with the more stable environment of the past (Ford, 2008). Non-profit leaders highlight the difficulty of sustainability in a changing environment, noting the struggle to keep base services while also responding to new conditions in traditional ways (Cummings, 2018). For instance, the controls of a bureaucratic approach can help build minimal structures and scope for adaptation, and the customer responsiveness of a market approach reinforces the need for constant attention to stakeholder needs, but both are inadequate to keep pace with a dynamic environment and complex issues. The breadth and pace of change required of organizations has increased dramatically, and the past approaches with which many organizations are accustomed to approaching change still provide some utility but are insufficient to adapt and respond.

Maintaining the ability to produce community benefit in the contemporary environment is instead driven by embracing change as a creative force, in the face of instability, and utilizing ongoing strategy management to enable constant learning, adaptation, and interaction with other actors and the evolving environment (Ford, 2008). Embracing continual change as a creative force can send shivers down good bureaucratic and business spines, but Kramer (2018) notes that CBOs can be free from some of the constraints that limit administrative and market-driven organizations, and more able to focus on mission, experiment with new approaches to complex issues, and advocate for systems change. Numerous authors caution, however, that individual organizations lack the scale and speed to address complex issues alone (Kramer, 2018; Taylor, 2018; Mollenhauer, 2017; Senge, Hamilton and Kania, 2015; Cornforth, Hayes, and Vangen, 2014). Raynor, Cardona, Knowlton, Mittenthal, and Simpson (2014) suggest that this is neither inappropriate nor insurmountable since CBOs are distinctly formed from relationships and have always worked together to solve social problems. Individual CBOs are adapting and building collaboration across organizations, challenging past assumptions about the primacy of individual organizational growth, control, and identity (Mollenhauer, 2017; Senge et al., 2015). Increasingly working in networks, individual CBOs have been benefiting from increased scope (i.e. breadth of mandates and practice) and agility (i.e. diversity and volume of skills, greater opportunity for distributed task leadership, greater capacity to learn) to adjust and match the pace and complexity of their environment for the past 20 years (Cornforth et al., 2014; Benington, 2011; Provan and Kenis, 2008; Surman and Surman, 2008). In this way, networks of non-profits gain the potential to adapt and continue providing benefit to their stakeholders.

As such, both the approach and alignment of organizations seemingly best-suited to effect change appear different in the context of the current CBO and community service environment. Networks harness the capacity of individual organizations by mobilizing their efforts and expertise toward a common purpose, ideally creating both the scope and agility of the network to adapt strategy to complex issues and a changing environment (Taylor, 2018; Zywert, 2018; Favoreu, Carassus and Maurel, 2016; Cornforth et al., 2014; Benington, 2011; Burnes, 2005). Networks have emerged as a game-changing, adaptive response to the pressure that CBOs and their leaders face to keep pace with the dynamic community services environment.

Capacities for working in networks

Networks of CBOs are formed of linkages between interdependent organizations and are becoming a central feature in non-profit community service, beginning to displace the models of hierarchical

bureaucracy and market competition that dominated from the 1950s to 1990s (Zywert, 2018; Ontario Nonprofit Network, 2015; Benington, 2011; Provan and Kenis, 2008). Not only are networks an adaptation that provides greater potential to produce strategies and services relevant to a greater breadth of stakeholder needs, they are also an adaptation in how organizations are managed, and how change is pursued.

The literature does not suggest that all networks are created equal, nor effective. Networks are critiqued as succumbing to collaborative inertia and low legitimacy if they become bogged-down in process, fail to engage internal and external stakeholders in sufficient participatory decision-making, or make accountability difficult to ascertain because decision-making is distributed or shared (Zywert, 2018; Cornforth et al., 2014; Proven and Kenis, 2008; Rhodes, 2007; Stoker, 2006). Networks can guard against these pitfalls by emphasizing collaborative relationships, participatory decision-making, fluid forms that prioritize and distribute action, and shared learning and generative strategy-making in the pursuit of mutual goals and public good (Taylor, 2018; Zywert, 2018; Gloger, Lllanos, Iveniuk, and Modlinska, 2016; Cornforth et al., 2014; Benington, 2011; Bovaird, 2008; Provan and Kenis, 2008; Rhodes, 2007). The capacities that create these conditions appear largely associated with at least two broad capabilities:

- Capacity for networked governance (Cornforth et al., 2014; Benington, 2011; Proven and Kenis, 2008; Rhodes, 2007), and
- Capacity for managing complex change (Burnes, 2014; Wolf, 2011; Ford, 2008).

Specific elements of these capacities provide for how networks manage their direction and actions, and adapt to their environment, generating a network's scope and agility.

Networked governance: Benington (2011) and Rhodes (2007) apply the term “networked governance” to stakeholders collaborating as networks to steer activity for community wellbeing and community service provision. Networked governance is distinct from organizational governance, representing processes for defining common purpose and action across multiple independent organizations which are not typically governed within a hierarchy together (Cornforth et al., 2014; Proven and Kenis, 2008; Rhodes, 2007). Within this context, research suggests that interpersonal collaborative relationships, pursuit of a common goal, and inter-organizational exchange can substitute the authority of the hierarchies of single organizations within collaborative networks (Cornforth et al., 2014; Rhodes, 2007; Stoker, 2006). In other words, networks govern themselves by coming together and cooperatively making decisions, across members, rather than through a hierarchy.

Networks also require means to set priorities and coordinate action (Cornforth et al., 2014; Proven and Kenis, 2008), including structures and processes for shared leadership and stakeholder engagement, and for enabling common purpose and agile decision-making, learning, and action (Zywert, 2018; Mollenhauer, 2017; Favoreau et al., 2016; Gloger et al., 2016; Burnes, 2014; Surman and Surman, 2008; Rhodes, 2007). Collaborative leadership across a network serves to establish the network's purpose and authority, and shared engagement of network members and their stakeholders consolidates support for, and legitimizes, the network's shared purpose. Utilizing nimble decision-making then enables a network to move to action on its common purpose quickly, distributing task management to lead activity and increase innovation in real-time. Taken together, these capacities for networked governance appear to constitute critical network capability, enabling a network of non-profit organizations to establish, legitimize, support, and make decisions to act upon and adapt its purpose as a

network.

Managing complex change: In addition to governing themselves, networks of non-profits require the capability to adjust strategies to meet stakeholders' needs, undertaking change relevant to their environment. Networks must navigate external variables, such as regulations and social trends, to discern the approach to change most suited to their environment (Burnes, 2014). As established, the current non-profit community service environment is dynamic and requires ongoing adaptation to changing conditions (Burnes, 2014; Wolf, 2011; Ford, 2008). Within this context, the idea of sustainability may need to evolve from the pursuit of sustainable structures and strategies to the sustainability of performance (service and mission results) maintained by continuous change as a matter of normal work (Wolf, 2011). Two capacities that can help networks conceptualize and carry-out ongoing adaptation are systems and complexity thinking and strategy management (Wolf, 2011; Ford, 2008; Burnes, 2005).

Big-picture systems and complexity thinking provides a way of understanding a network in relation to its environment, and continuous change and strategy management provides an integrated planning and management approach for selective, ongoing strategy adaptation (Ford, 2008; Burnes, 2005). Adopting mindsets for systems and complexity enables network members the perspective to envision the potential to react to, or influence, the environment, and to assess how strategy may evolve, on an ongoing basis, to respond and remain relevant to the environment. Discerning those strategies least relevant to the environment for selective, ongoing transformation enables a network to avoid overwhelming its adaptive capacity. Meanwhile, integrating strategy planning, implementation, learning, and adjustment allows a network to transform and adapt in real-time and maintain continuous progress. Combined, these capacities for managing complex change enable a network to envision systems change, act with coherent behaviours as a network pursuing intentional change, and pursue discerning, tangible, continuous adaptation within the context of the dynamic environment.

Foundational abilities and behaviours: Networked governance and managing complex change call upon CBO leaders to act in new ways that may be different and distinct from the cultures and methods of individual organizations, but also provide the means for networks to realize the potential of their greater scope and agility to create community benefit. Networked governance helps networks function internally and engage stakeholders, define common purpose, make decisions, and act in a coordinated manner with a broad scope of potential. In turn, managing complex change enables networks to carry that common purpose forward and match strategy to changing trends in the environment and the needs of stakeholders, through shared continuous adaptation and a level of agility that surpasses individual organizations.

Broad analysis suggests that realizing these benefits, leaning into the capabilities of networked governance, and managing complex change requires that networks exhibit foundational abilities and behaviours, including:

- Continuously communicating and working through horizontal relationships;
- Establishing common goals through broadly-inclusive (all stakeholders) direction-setting;
- Balancing diverse stakeholder interests and creative tension to make collaborative decisions and pursue results through consensus;
- Practicing inclusive and shared learning and co-creation of strategy;
- Establishing flat, adjustable structures and distributed task leadership; and

- Discerning connections between system actors and elements, and strategies losing systemic relevance

(Cummings, 2018; Zywert, 2018; Mollenhauer, 2017; Favoreu et al., 2016; Gloger et al., 2016; Ontario Nonprofit Network, 2015; Senge et al., 2015; Burnes, 2014; Cornforth et al., 2014; Burke, 2011; Wolf, 2011; Bovaird, 2008; Ford, 2008; Surman and Surman, 2008; Rhodes, 2007; Stoker, 2006; Burnes, 2005). Forming a network does not automatically result in the ability to exhibit these behaviours and capabilities, though, and networks may struggle to realize their potential scope and agility without intentional capacity-building that creates the necessary mindsets, practices, and environment.

Building network capacity

If organizing as a network doesn't necessarily result in the capabilities that permit networks to seize the potential of their scope and agility, how then do these capacities come about? Progressive CBOs, public, private, and non-profit funders, and sector-building organizations care about building network capacity. The greater prevalence of networks appears to coincide with a shift from a context in which an individual organization could be independently effective to one that requires it to participate in a network of organizations to transform and adapt with the environment. This raises the question of how best to build network capacity, to leverage network scope and agility to benefit stakeholders. This shift and this question matter in a time of growing reliance upon CBOs to provide social benefits without commensurate resources; adaptation is necessary in order to sustain and even increase the benefits that non-profits provide.

Openly is an Ontario-based social impact consulting firm that supports a growing cohort of CBOs working in collaborative networks. In early 2018, in an effort to dig into the experience of building network capacity, Openly engaged with the literature as well as leaders from three networks – the Cambridge Neighbourhood Organizations, Toward Common Ground (Guelph), and another emerging network in Waterloo-Wellington – to bring insight to bear on the community service environment, networks, and network capacity. The experiences of leaders and the trends in the literature mirror one-another and suggest:

- The importance of building new conceptualizations of key concepts (e.g. sustainability) and limiting factors that can inhibit network capability;
- Investing in relationship development and building the key network abilities and capabilities identified above; and
- Creating an enabling environment that fosters collaborative work.

Without these conditions, network leaders are pulled between responsibilities for agency stewardship and network contribution as well as clashing organizational and network systems and practices, and stretched to respond to evolving stakeholder needs without commensurate resources.

Consistent with the literature, network leaders affirm that the non-profit community service environment is tenuous and quickly shifting, sustainability for individual non-profits seeking to go-it-alone is increasingly untenable as the work that organizations are doing grows in scope without commensurate resources. The sector is in the advanced stages of a movement toward organizing as networks to adapt (Cummings, 2018). Literature does not suggest that the time of independent organizations has come to an end, but that non-profits must build capacity suited to aligning, partnering, and playing effective roles within multiple systems (Raynor et al., 2014; Grant-makers for Effective

Organizations, 2013). Not surprisingly, CBO leaders who already work effectively in networks acknowledge the need for adaptation; they recognize that networks provide potential for greater capacity to meet stakeholder needs. They also caution, however, that network capacities for shared leadership and engagement; shared decision-making and action; systems and complexity thinking; and continuous change are broad and messy in practice and can leave leaders feeling caught between their networks and their own organizations. This requires changes in mindsets, practices, and the funding, policy, and sector-supporting environment.

Mindsets: the abilities that underpin network capacities may be constrained or eroded by conflicting ideas or dilemmas about collaboration, which can manifest as under-engagement, split purpose, or other limiting behaviours within networks. These dilemmas can be addressed by confronting perceived trade-offs and adopting concepts supportive of collaboration. Specifically, it appears:

- Networks should seek to integrate organizational missions with the shared purpose of the network (Cummings and Darisi, 2018; Zywert, 2018; Bodwell and Chermack, 2010; Ford, 2008). Network leaders caution that if members struggle with a perceived trade-off between supporting the network purpose and stewarding their organization's own mission, engagement may fluctuate, or members may protect organizational interests and struggle to release individual control and participate in collaborative decision-making (Cummings, 2018),
- Networks should harness change as a creative force for keeping pace with the environment (Cummings and Watson, 2018; Burke, 2011; Wolf, 2011; Ford, 2008). Key informants warn that if networks seek to minimize change in favour of consistency, they risk entrenching structures and strategies that no longer fit the environment. Adaptation is necessary even if contrary to the culture of control (Cummings, 2018); and
- Networks should broadly share leadership and engagement, involving the internal *and* external stakeholders of network members in defining purpose, and distributing task leadership across members within that purpose to maximize legitimacy and capacity to make progress in real-time (Cornforth et al., 2014; Proven and Kenis, 2008; Stoker, 2006). Network members emphasize that if individual organizational stakeholders do not feel that a network's decisions reflect their individual and organizational perspectives, and if members cannot discern their direct contributions and impact, they may de-prioritize their investment of time, support, and other resources (Cummings, 2018).

Recognizing the factors and balancing the tensions that can restrain collaboration helps avoid under-investment of time or shared resources, and the fear of conflict or loss of control that can strip away collaborative confidence.

Practice: network members suggest that building reciprocal relationships, common identity, and core capacities should be an early focus in network development (Cummings, 2018). Leaders differentiate between building capacity for essential practices in a network, compared to a single organization, noting that networks bring together the unique cultures and practices of individual organizations (Cummings, 2018; Rhodes, 2007). Reciprocal relationships appear to be of primary importance to networks, replacing formal organizational structures, early on, with cooperative relationships (Chandler and Scott-Kennedy, 2015; Ford, 2008; Stoker, 2006). They appear foundational to the exchanges that underpin networks (Gloger et al., 2016), essential for the shared learning and co-creation of strategy that provide a network much of its adaptive capacity (Wolf, 2011), and important to increase willingness to take shared risks, interchangeably lead and listen, and provide means to address internal

political and power issues (Cummings, 2018). Network leaders and literature suggest building relationships and core capacities alike through:

- Shared control over learning, ideally expressed through a defined agenda for learning tailored to the purposes of the network (Favoreu et al., 2016; Burnes, 2014);
- Increasing understanding of the specific environment that the networks work within to anchor and draw-out big-picture systems thinking; and
- A focus on developing capacities for shared leadership, systems-thinking, ongoing adaptation, change and strategy management (Cummings, 2018).

Practicing these capacities is not easy. For decades, leaders of CBOs have been encouraged to build linear, horizontal structures and practices to control decisions and organizational processes, and held accountable for stewarding the singular pursuits of their organization's mission. They have developed practices accordingly. Shared learning and relationships can help leaders co-create new practices for shared leadership and engagement, decision-making and action, systems and complexity thinking, and approaches to collaboratively manage complex change.

Enabling environment: network members clearly have a crucial role to play in being open to, embracing, and building the mindsets and capacities necessary to activate their potential scope and agility. However, they cannot do it alone: CBOs require relationships and investment to serve their missions, and it shouldn't be surprising that funders and sector-building organizations have a critical role to play in creating the conditions for network success. The non-profit sector evolved as a result of people and organizations voluntarily working together to solve social problems by building systems of scale (Raynor et al., 2014; Pratt, 2001). Since the 1950s, those systems have largely been organized as individual organizations working independently. In today's context, however, funders and capacity-building organizations must participate and aid in the transformation of the sector and its systems to foster the networked and relational approaches necessary to keep pace with the environment. They must become partners, adapt, and be welcomed, to assume a place within networks, and play active roles, convening, investing in, and encouraging collective approaches (Raynor et al., 2014; Grant-makers for Effective Organizations, 2013). They can change past bureaucratic and market-oriented structures and best-practices that encourage control and competition, a mismatch to today's environment, and instead foster connection, support long-term work, and enable collaboration (Zywert, 2018; Raynor et al., 2014; Grant-makers for Effective Organization, 2013.) These system architects can create an environment that enables networked approaches conducive to adaptation and continuing to meet the needs of the stakeholders that CBOs, funders, and sector-building organizations share.

Conclusion

Networks are transformational for the pursuit of community benefit, an adaptive response to a dynamic environment in which CBOs need to build scope and agility to continually change so they continue to serve and produce value for their stakeholders. Networks are not, however, an incremental improvement upon past models of providing services independently; they require:

- New conceptualizations of factors such as change and sustainability, individual organizational success, and stakeholder engagement;
- New practices and abilities that comprise capacities such as shared leadership and accountability; and
- An environment that enables collaboration rather than the competition and control of past

bureaucratic and market approaches.

CBO leaders can feel caught between mounting, isolating pressures to steward their individual organizations and greater need to participate in more collaboration – they may never have been more alone and more together. They stress that if alignment between network purpose and organizational missions is maintained, that if leadership is shared, and that if structure and roles enable early action and quick progress, each organization can efficiently serve its mission as an element of the network's larger purpose. If these conditions are not created, network members caution that participating organizations could be harmed and disengage, networks will suffer uneven contribution and engagement, or function at lower aspirations that fail to serve larger community purposes. CBO leaders, funders, and sector-building organizations all have significant roles to play to realize the greater scope and agility of networks to provide community benefit. At a time when communities are increasingly relying upon non-profit community services, under-supported network approaches will fail or underperform at best. Adequately supported, network approaches will enable CBOs to get on with their missions collectively, and the community benefit we're counting on.

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