

NETWORKS OF TRUST: making partnerships Work

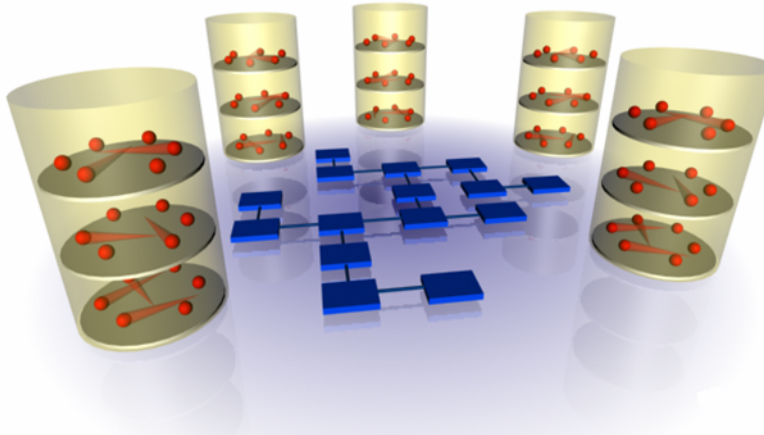
Jeremy Hawkins

“In any organisation there are two parallel worlds: one of authority from which unfolds formal rules, bureaucratic procedures, transactional traffic; and trust through which informal understandings are transmitted and a good portion of the real work is done. The former is characterised by hierarchical structure and the latter by networks. Managers understand the former; they live and breathe the hierarchy. What they fail to fully appreciate is the network of relationships that riddle their hierarchy because networks are built from trust and trust is invisible and ubiquitous”¹.

We all know intuitively that these two kinds of worlds exist and that we experience these formal and informal relationships in many aspects of our lives but particularly in our working lives. For example, I know who I would go to in my organisation for advice and guidance, irrespective of their position in the hierarchy. And I also know that the importance of some of these relationships goes unnoticed by the formal hierarchy.

Over the last ten years collaborative working in partnerships has increasingly been seen as a critical factor in successfully addressing some of the most pressing social and economic issues of our day, and I personally notice the changes that this emphasis on collaboration has brought to my own ‘networks of trust.’ I now regularly liaise and consult with people in a whole range of organisations and it’s clear that my behaviour is fairly typical. Five innovative projects in which I have been involved over the last few years have convinced me that the range and scale of the networks of trust that exist within and between organisations working on common goals is increasingly significant.

The Network Approach



It is also clear that improving these relationships and the networks of trust improves inter-agency working in areas where, in the past, alternative approaches have been unsuccessful. These same pilots have led to the development of a technique specifically designed to build on these instinctive networking behaviours, called Virtual Network Analysis (VNA). It is the collective term for a set of new methods that help people to see the world socially as well as formally – a world made up of relationships, warmth and coldness, help and hindrance. VNA initially maps how we behave as ‘porcupines’, negotiating our relationships not in communities and families but in the day to day work of businesses, public agencies and cities, and it then helps optimise the right balance of togetherness and apartness.

These methods have been used within commercial organisations and are now being used to make sense of the complex webs of partnerships and agencies that exist in every British town or city, struggling with problems of regeneration, crime and poverty. The pictures they reveal are very different from the assumptions of managers and political leaders. Often they show that relatively junior staff play a decisively important role in helping agencies to co-operate. They also often show which organisations are capable of co-operation – and which aren’t.

Take for example the work to reduce the incidence of domestic violence in Northampton. Approximately 35 organisations and agencies are involved in this work, straddling the public and voluntary & community sectors and effectively making up a single *virtual organisation*. Two young women police officers had led the way in setting up a drop-in centre for victims of domestic violence. They had both been moved on to other duties a good six months prior to the network survey. Nevertheless the *virtual organisation* still relied very heavily on them both, for expert advice, decision making, and even day to day work decisions. But the hierarchy was completely unaware of the continuing importance of the contributions of these two individuals to the collective effort.

Or take as another example the *virtual organisation* led by the Community Safety Partnership in Derby trying to reduce anti-social behaviour. Examination of the trust network around the sharing of expert advice showed that four individuals, all of whom were outside the formal partnership, had nevertheless become pivotal to its success from the perspective of the expertise they offered: a Councillor, a police beat leader, an employee of a housing association and a member of a neighbouring community partnership. Again the hierarchy had no idea how important they were. Then in a survey that looked at the networks involved in tackling burglary in Nottingham it was found that, as might be expected, decision-making and information exchange was centred within the police and that the managerial reach there was broad and deep. But hidden resources were discovered within the networks, so the challenge here was for the police to cultivate more expansive links with supporting organisations and to look at ways of aligning their own internal and well developed networks of trust with their formal hierarchical structures. The importance of this latter point is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that when it was noted that two new recruits to the police investigation team were still more ‘externally focussed’ than their more ‘experienced’ colleagues, the light hearted (but nevertheless telling) comment was “that they would soon be re-educated.”

Again and again in these studies it becomes clear that some organisations are consistently less ‘connected’ than others. The Crown Prosecution Service, the Probation Service and the Fire and Rescue Service all tended to be more self-contained, less familiar with co-operation. In some cities too the police turned out to be much worse at collaboration than other agencies, and in one, a voluntary organisation turned out to be the barrier in the way.

These patterns matter because problems like burglary or domestic violence cannot be solved through traditional organisational silos working in isolation. They are inherently connected problems; and their solution demands connected working. Across the UK a potentially far-reaching experiment is underway to create more connected and holistic working. Local Strategic Partnerships were set up to encourage better co-operation not just between public agencies but also with the private and voluntary sectors. A typical Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) will have a Board, and perhaps four or five separate Officer Groups for key themes such as health or community safety. The consultative network for the strategic management of the LSP could run to 500 or 600 people. The *virtual organisations* tackling the various themes will typically comprise 30 or 40 separate organisations and many hundreds of individuals.

These are now as much part of the reality of any town or city or county as the town halls and hospitals. But they are largely invisible, not just to the public but even to some of the people most closely involved. The starting point for working better in these partnerships is less to do with the world of authority, formal rules and bureaucratic procedures, and more to do with trust and creating the opportunities for inter-agency informal understandings to blossom and grow. VNA is helping achieve this. In particular it helps the managers of the silos understand the importance and value of the networks of trust that exist within and between their organisations and that they can be an aid rather than a barrier to the delivery of their own targets and objectives as well as the connected issues.

¹ Dr Karen Stephenson: Head of Netform International and leading exponent of Social Network Analysis