

A NETWORK APPROACH TO EDUCATOR SUPPORT

Cultivating Human
Systems to Advance
Educational Equity



Community
Wealth Partners

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Preface

Education support organizations (e.g., professional associations of education professionals) have long been a source of knowledge and support for education professionals, but for many networks, it has been difficult to keep up with the pace of change in the field and ensure their knowledge and resources are reaching those who need it most. To address this challenge, eight education support organizations came together to form a community of practice facilitating knowledge sharing with practitioners to support better outcomes for Black and Latino students and students experiencing poverty. The community of practice provided a space for these organizations to learn from peers, pilot new approaches, inspire further learning and collective action, and share insights with the field.

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funded the community of practice¹, as part of its K-12 Education Strategy. Community Wealth Partners led the design and facilitation — in partnership with community of practice members — and Results Lab provided measurement and evaluation support. Participating organizations in the cohort are as follows:

- Association of Latino Administrators & Superintendents
- The Benjamin Banneker Association
- Beyond100K
- Black Principals Network, powered by Surge Institute
- California Mathematics Project
- Math Circle Network
- National Association of Elementary School Principals
- NCSM: Leadership in Mathematics Education

A core belief of the community of practice is that creating space for members to build community, share knowledge, and pilot new approaches will help educators and administrators adopt new practices in pursuit of educational equity. This ethos can be characterized as a **network approach** — a method for navigating complex challenges by fostering connection, learning, and collaboration.

To explore this approach, we partnered with network consultant Amelia Pape, who shared concepts, frameworks, and tools with participants to help advance their practice. Amelia is the principal of [Network Approach](#) and a [Converge Network](#) co-creator. She also authored this report.

We are grateful to Amelia for her partnership in this work. We also would like to thank Lauri Valerio for authoring the case studies that contributed to this report and Courtney Harris for design services.

— the Community Wealth Partners team, March 2024

¹ This paper was written through funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Views expressed here do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the foundation.

Introduction

Education support organizations (ESOs), also known as education networks or professional education associations, have long been support hubs for education practitioners. Yet, the field of education is rapidly evolving, causing ESOs to reconsider what constitutes effective educator support. Recent years have seen a significant shift in how people connect and learn, largely influenced by the rise of virtual communication and online platforms. The challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have further accelerated these changes, pushing people toward digital tools for communication and learning.

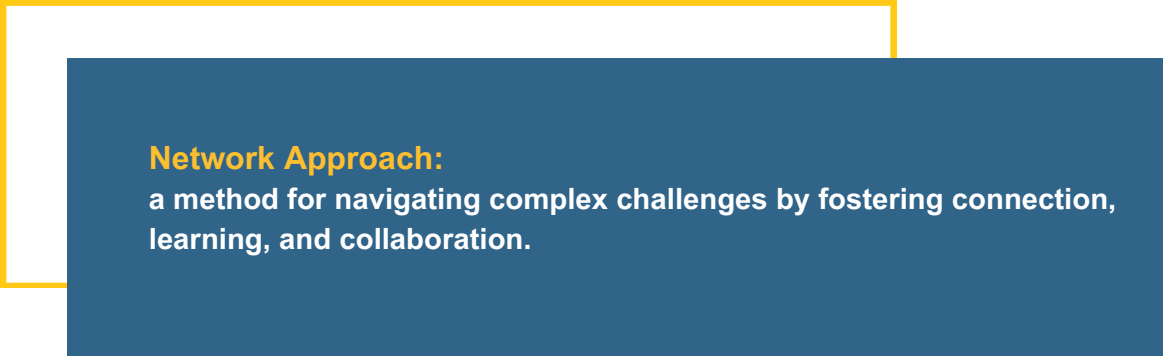
K-12 education professionals are at the center of these complex changes. Educators must evolve their practices to meet the demands of a new learning environment, often at a faster clip than their limited time and capacity can afford. Meanwhile, disparities in student learning outcomes persist, particularly for Black and Latino students and students experiencing poverty. In this challenging scenario, carving out time for professional development and support becomes as crucial as it is difficult.

Educational support organizations (ESOs):

professional associations that serve education practitioners. ESOs are also commonly referred to as education networks or professional associations of educators.

ESOs have an important role to play in helping educators navigate complex challenges and address disparities in student success, but they are not immune to the challenges at hand. As the field of education responds to dramatic changes — a global pandemic, teacher shortages, and political disputes about education approaches — some ESOs are finding their former models no longer yield desired outcomes. Many are struggling to find formats that align with members' busy schedules and needs. Others have realized they are not reaching diverse audiences whose engagement is essential to achieving equitable student success — whether it be professionals holding various roles in the education system, working in different parts of the country, or representing different races, ethnicities, and other diverse identities. Given the changing landscape, how might ESOs think differently about their approaches to educator support? How can they help educators learn and adopt new practices in service of more equitable education outcomes for students?

This was the impetus for the K-12 Education Networks Community of Practice, facilitated by Community Wealth Partners. A core belief of the community of practice is that creating space for members to build community, share knowledge, and pilot new approaches will help educators and administrators adopt new practices in pursuit of educational equity. This ethos can be characterized as a network approach — a method for navigating complex challenges by fostering connection, learning, and collaboration.



Network Approach:
a method for navigating complex challenges by fostering connection, learning, and collaboration.

The first part of this publication investigates the principles and practices associated with a network approach and how they may benefit ESOs. By drawing on contributors' experiences, the wisdom of network-minded thinkers and leaders in various fields, and real-world examples from the K-12 Education Networks Community of Practice, we aim to uncover the underlying assumptions regarding effective professional development, the transformative impact of human connection, and how embracing a network mindset can enhance support for education practitioners.

Part two introduces a practical framework to help those taking this approach understand how well it's working by evaluating the health of their networks. This section outlines four key domains of network health for consideration and offers tools for assessing them. Throughout the publication, we provide readers with tips and resources to apply elements of a network approach within their own contexts.

Part I: Exploring a Network Approach

We coexist in webs of relationships. From family to workplace, local community to society at large, relationships are the bedrock of the human experience. Core to taking a network approach is embracing the fact that we are not only interconnected through these systems of relationships but also interdependent — our actions and behaviors affect those around us in both obvious and subtle ways.

We can think of this perspective as a **network mindset**. “Those who have embraced the network mindset see themselves as part of a larger web of activity — as one of many nodes in the system, not the central hub,” David Ehrlichman writes in *Impact Networks*. “In this way, the network mindset shift can also be characterized as an evolution of focus from me to we².” In essence, a network approach is the process of putting this mindset into practice.

Cultivating the relationships that shape our world gives us access to diverse perspectives — the key to developing a more holistic understanding of the systems we hope to change. When those relationships are rooted in trust, we are more open to different points of view and more willing to voice ideas of our own. The insights that emerge from this context better equip us to navigate our increasingly complex world.

Education is changing in dynamic and multifaceted ways, and the challenges educators face are systemic.

Education is changing in dynamic and multifaceted ways, and the challenges educators face are systemic. The educational inequities that disproportionately affect Black and Latino students and students experiencing poverty can't be traced to one singular cause or solved by one entity alone. To manage the complexity of their field, ESOs can provide immense value by creating opportunities for their members to connect, learn, and collaborate across differences. From a place of connection, openness, and trust, education professionals can pool their collective wisdom and explore these challenges from many different angles. This coordinated interaction gives way to learning, innovation, and creative solutions that no single person could have imagined alone — the network approach in action.

²Ehrlichman, D. (2021). *Impact networks: Creating connection, sparking collaboration, and catalyzing systemic change*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Taking a network approach often presents a departure from traditional planning and operating methods. The following guiding principles help to illuminate the essence of this approach and how it may differ from dominant organizational frameworks:

1. Prioritize Relationships
2. Practice Humility
3. Promote Openness
4. Prepare for Emergence

These principles are expressed in the ways we approach tasks, make choices, and interact with others. Below, we delve into the nature of each principle and how it looks in practice.

Reader Exercise: Exploring the Network Mindset

Dominant organizational frameworks in the Western world are hierarchical. Operating in these environments naturally leads to a mindset that prioritizes the characteristics of hierarchical leadership — what we can think of as a hierarchical mindset. This means that adopting a network mindset often requires a willingness to confront the status quo, not just in traditional organizational culture, but in our behavior. While there is no “network mindset switch”, we can flip to immediately see the world differently, ESO leaders can try this perspective by reflecting on their organizational norms and priorities.

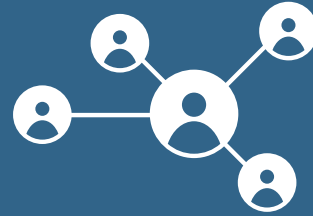
Using the table below, consider which of the following characteristics of hierarchical and network mindset feel true in your organization. Once you have identified a few that rise to the top, explore what implications these ways of thinking may have on your organization’s ability to advance its mission. There are no “right” answers here. Both hierarchal and network approaches have a place in various professional settings. This is simply a process of investigating how the ways we think can influence the culture we want to create.

Hierarchical Mindset	Network Mindset
Top-down, directive leadership	Distributed, servant leadership
Centralized decision-making	Collective decision-making
Information restricted	Information shared
Task-oriented	Relationship-oriented
Priority around control	Priority around trust
Organization at the center of focus	Purpose at the center of focus
Bias for deliberate strategy	Embrace of emergent strategy

Distinctions between the hierarchical mindset and the network mindset, adapted from Converge

I: Prioritize Relationships

Prioritizing relationships can influence how ESO staff interact with their members and how members interact with each other. In the context of a network approach, prioritizing relationships — or relationality — focuses on cultivating a specific type of relationship based on human connection. This is unique in professional settings, where most relationships are based on roles that are designed to accomplish transactions. For example, you interact with your doctor based on the shared expectation that you need health care and your doctor will provide it. Similarly, ESOs and their members commonly relate to each other based on the shared expectation that educators need resources and ESOs will provide them.



Relationality:
the acknowledgment that we exist in systems of complex and interdependent human relationships

In both examples, there is no apparent reason to get to know each other on a personal level beyond what is necessary to ensure both parties can accomplish their roles in the transaction. In contrast, the principle of relationality emphasizes forming relationships designed to create genuine connections between people. These connection-based relationships lead to important benefits for members like camaraderie, belonging, trust, and a sense that they are not navigating complex challenges alone — the intangible but essential aspects of support education professionals consistently say they need.

The relationships cultivated within a group not only benefit individual participants but also enhance the overall system by facilitating multidirectional knowledge sharing. In traditional ESO models, the organization typically acts as the central hub for information exchange, with members primarily interacting with the organization rather than with each other. While this setup is effective for centralized coordination, it can impede widespread dissemination of information. However, when members establish trusting relationships, they are more inclined to engage in open and direct communication with one another. Strengthening these connections among members enables knowledge to flow readily throughout the entire membership base, bypassing the need to channel through a central hub. ESOs can unlock the benefits of relationships by prioritizing activities that build connection and trust, both between staff and members, and across their membership.

Practices for ESOs: Relating Beyond Roles

In the simplest terms, ESOs are designed to provide services to their members, often in exchange for some kind of financial contribution. In this context, education professionals are viewed as the customers of ESOs. However, relating to members only as customers is a missed opportunity to engage them more actively as co-creators. By tapping into the knowledge and experience of members, the collective wisdom of the group becomes stronger. This approach encourages members to look to each other for support, fostering a collaborative environment where mutual learning and growth thrive, rather than solely depending on ESO staff for assistance.

Relating to members only as customers is a missed opportunity to engage them more actively as co-creators. By tapping into the knowledge and experience of members, the collective wisdom of the group becomes stronger.

To understand this concept in practice, we can look to the Black Principals Network (BPN), an ESO dedicated to the community, restoration, professional growth, and liberation of Black principals across the country. The main program among BPN's various network offerings is The Leadership Collaborative (TLC), an intimate cohort experience for leaders who share cultural backgrounds, experiences, and goals to gather, connect, innovate, and explore solution-based strategies while building community³. This offering wasn't predetermined nor developed by BPN staff alone. Instead, BPN invited its members to define what support means for them. Stepping outside role-based relationships and into a space of co-creation, deep listening, and multi-directional community with members — how BPN defines reciprocal engagement — created the conditions for this important program to emerge.

Similarly, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) launched the Principals of Color Network to provide a safe space for Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) school leaders to learn from each other. To inform the design of the network, NAESP staff engaged members of the network to help design and facilitate a participatory activity to get input from 125 members. Engaging network members as co-creators in the design of the offering allowed NAESP to reach more members than they could have otherwise and led to a program offering that is responsive to members' needs.

³ <https://www.networksforequity.com/post/imagining-networks-designed-for-educational-equity>

Cultivating trust-based relationships is an essential step in facilitating knowledge sharing and building community among members. Like BPN and NAESP, ESOs can enhance their offerings by shedding the customer-provider construct and moving into a space where staff and members engage in meaningful dialogue and experimentation as peers. Moreover, by facilitating member-to-member connections and enabling access to the diverse pool of knowledge within the community, ESOs can significantly enhance the overall value of membership.

TIPS AND TOOLS:

Cultivating Trust

Trust is the key that unlocks the benefits of human connection. Building trust is an ongoing commitment, but the process doesn't have to be daunting. A few simple practices, when conducted regularly, can shift the nature of relationships in a group surprisingly quickly.

- **Start with personal check-ins.**
 - Inviting participants to connect on a personal level at the beginning of each meeting normalizes personal connection even in routine conversations. Consider drawing from [these framing questions](#) to inspire your discussion prompts.
- **Tell stories.**
 - There are few more effective pathways to trust and connection than sharing the stories that shape who we are. During member gatherings, [try this group exercise](#) to encourage participants to share stories about their lives and discover unexpected connections among them.

II: Practice Humility

Humility

the awareness that we cannot understand complex systems from one vantage point alone

Humility can sound like a platitude. In the context of a network approach, it refers to the awareness that we don't — and really can't — know everything about the systems of which we're a part. This simple yet powerful premise helps groups avoid entrenched beliefs that inhibit communication and learning.

Practicing humility can sometimes feel like a process of unlearning the ways many of us were taught to recognize and embody leadership. In traditional management frameworks, leaders are expected to have the answers. Peter and Edgar Shein describe this paradigm as the culture of doing and telling⁴. “If you are a manager or a leader, you are supposed to know what to do, or at least appear to know what to do,” says Shein in *Humble Inquiry*. By this narrow definition of leadership, humility — a position of not knowing — is a risky practice. However, assuming we can understand complex challenges from a single point of view poses an even bigger risk.

In the parable of the blind men and the elephant⁵, a group of blind men each approach an elephant for the first time. One man touches the trunk and remarks that the elephant must resemble a snake. Another feels the elephant's leg and assumes it's a tree. A third man encounters the tail and surmises the elephant looks like a rope. Each man feels a different part of the elephant and, thus, adopts a different belief about it. The parable illustrates how different perspectives lead to distinct points of view, all of which are true, but none of which accurately explain the whole. This is the nature of complex systems: we cannot fully understand them from one vantage point alone. The humility principle calls us to acknowledge this truth, even when it's difficult or scary to do so.

⁴Schein, E. H. (2013). *Humble inquiry: the gentle art of asking instead of telling*. San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

⁵Wikimedia Foundation. (2024, February 16). *Blind men and an elephant*. Wikipedia.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_men_and_an_elephant

Practices for ESOs: Centering Member Needs

Practicing humility can support ESOs to deepen their understanding of member needs by creating honest and ongoing feedback loops. This is evident in the [Math Circle Network's](#) process to develop member-informed offerings. The Math Circle Network is an ESO that supports “math circles” — groups of math teachers or students that gather to engage in mathematical problem-solving in a collaborative setting. Since the network’s inception, the number of math circles around the country has grown tremendously, which is evidence of their value to participants. This rapid growth also meant that staff no longer knew the network or who their math circles served. As a result, they realized most circles were being established in well-resourced areas, highlighting a service gap that exacerbated access issues for under-resourced communities.

The Math Circle Network embodied humility by acknowledging their limited awareness and enacting practices to better understand the network. In August 2022, they conducted a needs assessment, which allowed them to develop a suite of programs largely informed by member needs. In the spring of 2023, the Math Circle Network did an in-depth network landscape analysis. Staff wanted to understand things like how often each math circle meets, where they meet, how many people show up, how they handle finances, whether they charge membership fees, whether they have partnerships with local schools or other organizations, whether they take a more competitive or collaborative approach to their sessions, and whether or how they work to increase equitable access to their circle. The analysis lifted up several bright spots across the network. For example, a Math Teacher Circle for Social Justice in Connecticut funds summer work for teachers to come up with social justice math lessons for middle or high school classrooms, test the lessons together, present them to colleagues, and publish an open-source online book for other teachers to utilize the lessons. It also highlighted growth opportunities. For instance, Math Circles of Chicago offers a paid training program in partnership with Chicago Public Schools for teachers who want to run their own after-school student math circles. Their model could be studied and replicated at other teacher circle sites.

The Math Circle Network's steps to more deeply understand their network helped them design new member-informed offerings and elevate promising practices that collectively help create more equitable access to math circles. This all began with acknowledging what they didn't know — a great example of humility in action.

The Math Circle Network’s steps to more deeply understand their network helped them design new member-informed offerings and elevate promising practices that collectively help create more equitable access to math circles. This all began with acknowledging what they didn’t know — a great example of humility in action. Humility helps us understand our place in the system and value the perspectives of others in different positions. Like the Math Circle Network, this practice can lead to stronger partnerships and innovative ideas that better position ESOs to provide value to their members in an ever-changing environment.

TIPS AND TOOLS:

Key Considerations

The Math Circle Network offers the following guidance for other ESOs:

- **Center your members’ needs.** It takes time to listen and understand your members’ needs and opportunities, and it takes humility to prioritize programs and offerings that address what you heard. But it’s necessary to ensure the network is growing in a way that strengthens its impact. And asking once isn’t enough; it’s critical to keep asking what network members need. “The needs of teachers are evolving,” said Claudia Rodriguez-Solorio, community outreach & program evaluation specialist. “For example, the pandemic has triggered new demands on educators, such as ways to engage students post-pandemic, and support with changing curriculum standards.”
- **Build relationships outside your network.** Connections to other networks like yours can offer insight into helpful practices and experiments. Connections to others in your field can deepen your understanding of “our place in the system,” says Brianna Donaldson, Math Circle Network director. Connections to organizations interested in your work can lead to partnerships or funding opportunities.

III: Promote Openness

Openness:
the belief that diverse perspectives are key to understanding complex systems

Openness is a close cousin to humility but differs in practice. While humility is about taking a position of not knowing, openness is the willingness to accept new ideas even when they differ from our own. Promoting openness in ESOs encourages members to share and learn from one another, deepening their relationships and understanding of their larger ecosystem. From this place of shared understanding, members' tendency to experiment and generate new ideas grows. ESOs practicing openness have the potential to accelerate not only the existing knowledge in the system but also emergent knowledge — the wisdom that only arises when many diverse perspectives converge to create a more holistic picture of the issue.

Many studies point to high-quality instructional resources as key to educator support. While this is undoubtedly true, access to content is only a part of what practitioners say they need. To keep pace with the volatile field, education professionals increasingly recognize the need to break through silos, elevate promising practices, and work together to make sense of what's happening. This requires a willingness to be open with colleagues about challenges and approach different opinions with curiosity. To encourage this principle to take root, ESOs can work to normalize, respect, and celebrate diverse perspectives by diversifying leadership across their networks.

Practices for ESOs: Diversifying Leadership

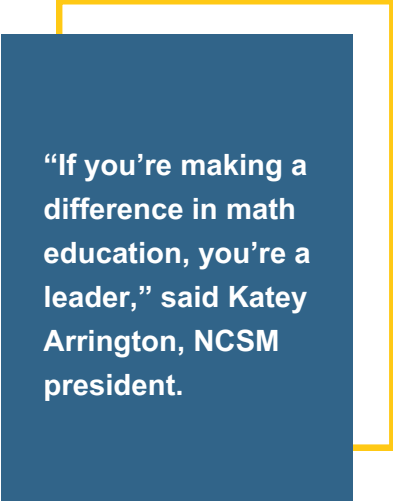
ESOs can promote openness by diversifying the individuals in leadership roles and broadening their definition of leadership practices. When leadership teams are made up of individuals from different backgrounds, roles, races, and identities, they are more likely to consider a wider range of viewpoints and approaches. This diversity fosters a culture of inclusivity, encourages innovation, and promotes creativity within the organization. At the same time, expanding the traditional boundaries of leadership practices recognizes a wider variety of skills and approaches, creating a more dynamic and engaging environment where different leadership styles are acknowledged and valued. Together, these practices cultivate a culture of openness where communication flows freely, new perspectives are respected, and all members feel empowered to contribute their unique strengths to the collective well-being of the group.

Many ESOs seek to distribute and diversify leadership in their staff and among their members. However, this proves challenging when leadership criteria are narrowly defined. When only a select few see themselves represented in leadership roles or believe their skills are relevant, groups miss out on valuable contributions from people whose experience may fall outside the dominant leadership paradigm. NCSM: Leadership in Mathematics Education saw this situation unfold in their organization and took proactive steps to change it.

NCSM works to equip and empower a diverse education community to engage in leadership that supports, sustains, and inspires high-quality mathematics teaching and learning every day for each and every learner. The NCSM board became increasingly aware of the lack of diversity in the network’s membership and board of directors. Specifically, the organization recognized the need to engage people with a broader range of lived experiences and identities across race, ethnicity, gender, geography, religion, and sexual orientation. To address this issue, NCSM first worked to foster leadership among historically excluded people in the network — encouraging people to seek leadership on the board even if they didn’t hold a formal leadership role within their education systems.

“If you’re making a difference in math education, you’re a leader,” said Katey Arrington, NCSM president.

In 2022, despite the board’s efforts to support a diverse set of nominees, the network had an all-white slate of candidates for elected board positions. This moment served as an awakening for the board and motivated them to do deeper work. To understand where things went wrong, the organization looked at its board nomination process. NCSM uses a rubric to determine which nominees will be on the ballot for elected board positions. The board realized the rubric didn’t reflect the types of diversity they wanted to prioritize and, as a result, produced a homogeneous slate of candidates. As an immediate step, they changed the nominations rubric to be more inclusive of different lived experiences. Then, they shared the rubric with all nominees to make the evaluation process more transparent and to lift up the diverse criteria they sought. In the 2023 board election, 25 percent of the candidates on the ballot were people of color.



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Leadership experience on the NCSM nomination forms was traditionally demonstrated by volunteer work in a local or state organization, or by experience in a formal institutional leadership role. By recognizing that leadership exists beyond these traditional boundaries, NCSM sought to broaden how they document leadership experience by considering additional work and lived experiences.

A wider variety of people were able to see themselves in that new, more inclusive definition of leadership, which fostered a culture that sought out and valued diverse perspectives. This is openness in practice.

The principles of relationality, humility, and openness are interrelated. They have value on their own, but like a network, their potential for impact exists in the interplay among them. When combined, these principles have the potential to cultivate something more than the sum of its parts: the alchemical quality of a network approach that we call emergence.

TIPS AND TOOLS:

Key Considerations

For other ESOs working to diversify their membership and board, NCSM's experience offers several lessons.

- **Balance listening and taking action.** It is critical to take time to understand what's at the root of the network's lack of diversity and listen deeply to the people you want to be engaged in your work. At the same time, don't let this prevent you from taking action. "There's always something to be learned," notes Paul Gray, immediate NCSM past president. "Do the things you know are right, and keep thinking. It won't be perfect, but do the very best you can."
- **Be overt in your goals.** NCSM included straightforward language on their website and in calls for board nominees, saying they were looking for a diverse set of candidates. They shared the updated rubric that was more inclusive of people with different lived experiences. And they talked explicitly with network members across a variety of backgrounds and experiences about their desire to foster their leadership.
- **Use failures to shift your mindset and tactics.** When an all-white group was elected to the board in 2022, NCSM could have developed a sense of hopelessness in its efforts. Instead, the moment created a mindset shift and catalyzed the board to change its tactics. "We realized, if this isn't working, we need to do something different immediately," Katey said. The next election was much more representative.

IV: Prepare for Emergence

Emergence:

the understanding that the potential of a complex system is more than the sum of its parts

Preparing for emergence helps ESOs stay flexible, adaptable, and innovative in response to the changing education landscape. Emergence is the process of new patterns, behaviors, and actions arising in a group through collective learning and interaction. It is evident throughout our lives, from the spontaneous formation of traffic patterns in a city based on individual drivers' choices to the formation of cultural norms in societies over time. The mesmerizing synchronized patterns in schools of fish or flocks of birds are examples of emergence in nature.

In networks, emergence occurs in the form of collaboration and innovation. When people in a group come together under a shared purpose to connect and share knowledge, individual ideas and contributions interact and combine in unexpected ways, leading to the emergence of new projects or approaches that no single person could have conceived alone. ESOs can prepare for emergence by remaining open to unexpected opportunities, challenges, or ideas and adjusting their efforts accordingly. By building trust among members and encouraging learning and experimentation, ESOs create an environment where fresh insights and solutions can emerge from the group's collective wisdom. This benefits individual members and helps to advance the purpose they share.

Practices for ESOs: Creating the Container

Emergence is unpredictable by nature. Because ambiguity can be uncomfortable, it helps to provide a safe container for it to occur within — “a hospitable space for working with whatever arises,” as Peggy Holman writes in *Engaging Emergence*⁶. To create this container, participants first need a shared purpose that inspires them to show up. In an ESO, clarifying a common purpose, such as addressing the nation’s STEM teacher shortage, for example, helps focus members’ energy and allows them to build connections based on shared values.

Next, they need time and space to explore the purpose they share from many different angles. ESOs can create this opportunity by convening members regularly and facilitating connections among them to catalyze learning and collaboration.

⁶Holman, P. (2010). *Engaging emergence: Turning upheaval into opportunity*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

We see this process in practice at Beyond100K, an ESO that attributes its success to what it calls “networked impact.”⁷ The organization launched in response to President Obama’s State-of-the-Union call for 100,000 more STEM teachers — a clear and compelling purpose — but its catalysts quickly understood the need for cross-sector collaboration to advance this goal. Beyond100K enacted a strategy to convene both expected and unlikely partners with the explicit intention of cultivating an environment that prioritizes relationships, encourages and supports vulnerability, and builds trust among members. As a result, members derived meaning and authentic human connection from participation, which inspired them to keep engaging. This strategy also accelerated the network’s ability to create impact. Ultimately, thanks to commitments and contributions from many diverse partners across the network, Beyond100K didn’t just meet its 100,000 STEM-teacher goal — it exceeded it.

“The most valuable part of this work for me and my colleagues has been the opportunity to connect with individuals who are all addressing the same challenges,” says Deb Sachs, Assistant Professor Emerita, former Director of Woodrow Wilson Indiana Teaching Fellowship and Teach (STEM)³ Programs, University of Indianapolis. “It has helped to not feel so isolated in our work and to know that there is a cohesive group of people all working to improve education in many ways and at many levels.”⁸

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As evidenced in Beyond100K’s approach, convening participants under a shared purpose isn’t meant to create homogeneity but to invite diversity. A central purpose provides common ground at the outset, but as people explore many diverse perspectives about the purpose they share, they begin to discover new possibilities, see the ways their values intersect, and develop a deeper understanding of the issue they aim to address⁹. Convening participants in this context helps individuals see beyond their usual ideas. It prepares the group for innovation by increasing the chances of interactions among people with different beliefs and ways of working. This process takes time, but its payoff is worth it. According to Holman, “inviting diversity is one of the most time-consuming, challenging, and critical activities of engaging emergence.”

⁷ Milgrom-Elcott, T. (2016, October 11). *Networked impact: this is not your grandfather’s coalition*. Stanford Social Innovation Review. Retrieved February 29, 2024, from https://ssir.org/articles/entry/networked_impact_this_is_not_your_grandfathers_coalition#.

⁸ 100Kin10. (2019). *2019 Annual Report*. <https://2019annualreport.100kin10.org/>.

⁹ Ehrlichman, D. (2021). *Impact networks: Creating connection, sparking collaboration, and catalyzing systemic change*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

TIPS AND TOOLS:

Purpose Stands

Clarifying a shared purpose involves letting members share their personal motivations, which helps them look beyond surface-level differences and find where their values overlap. During convenings, try [this group exercise](#) to encourage members to communicate their “why.”

Part II: Assessing Network Health

The emergent nature of a network approach can feel uncertain. Its departure from more linear organizational strategies can make it difficult to assess using traditional program evaluation tools. However, it is possible to evaluate how well the approach is taking root. ESOs can do this by examining the degree to which they are creating opportunities for connection, learning, and emergence in their networks. We call this *network health*.

Assessing network health allows ESOs to measure the strength of the connections between their members, identify how knowledge is flowing among them, and understand whether they are making progress toward their larger strategic goals. Additionally, incorporating these assessment tools can help ESOs:

- Track changes in membership over time
- Understand how and why members engage in the network
- Identify opportunities to facilitate connections between members
- Target their support to increase the value of the participation for members
- Identify areas of strength that can support the development of best practices
- Systematically gather feedback from members and create a feedback loop whereby members can inform ESO development
- Tell the story of their organization's progress and emergent outcomes over time, which supports member recruitment and fundraising efforts

Network health can be assessed by gathering information in four primary domains: **connectivity**, **participant experience**, **collaborative infrastructure**, and **emergent activity**. Below, we explore these components of healthy networks and how ESOs can track and measure those aspects of their work.

Connectivity

Once practitioners join an ESO, one of the first ways they can derive value from membership is by connecting with other members. This helps them become more aware of the larger ecosystem they are a part of and lays the groundwork for building meaningful relationships and mobilizing knowledge among them. An ESO with a greater number of connections among members has a stronger and more resilient structure to support learning and collaboration.

Connectivity is a measure of the depth and density of relationships in a group, or how regularly and with whom participants connect, communicate, and share information. This information helps ESOs understand where connections are robust and where they can be strengthened. The effectiveness of a network approach depends on the strength of connections between participants, so understanding connectivity is an essential means of assessing progress.

Member Weaving:
the regular practice of connecting directly with members and connecting members with one another to facilitate more and deeper relationships across the network.

TIPS AND TOOLS:

Social Network Analysis

The most effective tool for measuring connectivity is called social network analysis (SNA), also known as network mapping. SNA results provide an empirical representation of the patterns of connection and disconnection among participants at a given moment. Learn more about conducting a social network analysis [here](#).

Weaving Connections

Social network analysis contains incredibly useful data for networks, but it can be challenging to administer without staff experience or resources to outsource the process. In the absence of an SNA, ESOs can take smaller steps to assess how relationships are forming by tracking insights from weaving — the practice of connecting directly with members and connecting members with one another. While this won't offer the same comprehensive data found in an SNA, capturing insights from weaving conversations can help ESOs understand who is connected to whom and find opportunities to strengthen those connections. At the same time, integrating a regular practice of weaving also builds connectivity in a network, so weaving contributes to network health in multiple ways. Explore [these questions](#) to inspire your weaving conversations.

Participant Experience

This domain of network health assesses how participants perceive the value of their experience in the group. By giving participants regular opportunities to provide input and using it to tailor support, ESOs can signal to members that their perspectives matter.

ESOs can track this by routinely administering a survey asking members how their participation has impacted them or their organizations. While some outcomes of a network approach can't be predicted, we can expect participants to derive certain individual and/or organizational benefits from their membership experience. Assessing participant experience helps illuminate those benefits.

For example, when a network approach is effective, participants will likely experience the following:

- **Participant-level outcomes:** increased knowledge, skills, and system awareness; increased professional effectiveness; increased meaningful relationships with other participants
- **Organization-level outcomes:** increased coordination of existing efforts; amplification of reach/impact of existing efforts; increased organizational effectiveness.

ESOs that understand participant experience can target their efforts to enhance the value of membership, leading to more efficient use of resources and more engaged members.

TIPS AND TOOLS:

Participant Experience Survey

Consider adapting this [sample participant experience survey](#) to your ESO's context.



Collaborative Infrastructure

Assessing collaborative infrastructure involves tracking fundamental information about member participation and ESO offerings. Tracking this information can help ESOs understand membership trends and participants' engagement over time. For example, these data may help ESOs identify potential lapses in representativeness due to membership changes or decreases in engagement, which may be used to support diversity, equity, and inclusion goals.

ESOs typically offer a variety of engagement opportunities such as convenings, a communication platform, and various symposia. These activities help promote connection, learning, and emergence among members, and their performance (e.g., number of convenings held and level of attendance) is an important indication of health.

Assessing collaborative infrastructure is primarily a process of tracking essential administrative information, namely:

- Membership (# active, % growth, % attrition)
- Convenings (existence of, frequency, cadence, key outcomes)
- Activities between convenings (existence of, frequency, cadence, attendance)
- Communication platform (existence of, effectiveness, facilitation, and curation)
- Agreements developed by and for members, including shared values and principles, standards of engagement, governance documents, or other group agreements.

TIPS AND TOOLS:

This [sample network coordination dashboard](#) is a simple example of how some networks gather administrative information about collaborative infrastructure.

Emergent Activity

Incorporating a metric around emergent activity can help ESOs tell a more complete story of their successes that may otherwise go unnoticed. Emergent activity is a record of the new projects, partnerships, and innovations that arise among members. This does not include planned activities hosted by the ESO such as convenings, workshops, or other predetermined offerings. Emergent activities are spontaneous or innovative collaborations born from high levels of connectivity, members having positive experiences engaging with the organization, and effective collaborative infrastructure.

Examples of emergent activity include new programming or innovations among members like in the Math Circle Network, where a regional set of math teacher circles in North Carolina created a financially sustainable community through outreach to statewide philanthropies. Emergent activity can also be demonstrated through innovations within members' existing work. In the K-12 Education Networks community of practice, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) invited fellow members from the California Mathematics Project (CMP) and The Benjamin Banneker Association (BBA) to write articles that will be featured in its math-focused issue of [Principal magazine](#), a special edition that was in part inspired by NAESP's participation in the community of practice.

ESOs can track emergent activity by gathering basic information about each of the new collaborative activities occurring among their members. This includes the name of the collaborative project or partnership, the purpose of the collaboration, the names of the collaborators, the date the collaboration started, and any outcomes to date. This information is typically collected through qualitative means like member weaving calls, surveys, and stories shared during network convenings.

Emergent activity is likely happening in many ESOs, so tracking it may simply be a process of acknowledging existing efforts in a new way. The Leadership Collaborative (TLC), the cohort experience facilitated by the [Black Principals Network](#) (BPN), provides a useful example. TLC wasn't a predetermined offering — it emerged through a process of deep listening and reciprocal dialogue with members. The inaugural cohort was considered a success. Yet, through a network health lens, the fact that it emerged is noteworthy in and of itself. It demonstrates that the conditions for emergence are present — the garden is bearing fruit.

TIPS AND TOOLS:

The [sample network coordination dashboard](#) provides a space for tracking emergent activity.

Reframing Success

Every ESO is unique, and the domains of network health may not neatly map to the nuances of each organization's context. ESOs that want to incorporate this framework may have to reconceive some organizational goals to align them with network health indicators. For example, prioritizing connectivity means resources must be directed toward building relationships between members, also known as member weaving. This may elevate a need for different staff capacities or new priority offerings such as more frequent member convenings. Similarly, if member experience becomes a key performance metric, ESOs must dedicate time to gathering, analyzing, and integrating insights from participant feedback on a regular basis. Importantly, network health doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing premise. Even if ESOs aren't able to formally adopt the assessment framework, the concept of network health can help them think differently about how they define success.

Conclusion

As trusted allies for many education professionals, ESOs that embrace the principles of a network approach are uniquely positioned to help practitioners navigate their rapidly evolving field. Intentionally fostering trusting relationships creates inclusive spaces for connection, community, and personal growth. Building a culture of humility accelerates knowledge flow by encouraging individuals from all backgrounds to share their wisdom. Promoting openness helps people break through limiting beliefs and discover the value of diverse perspectives. From a foundation of trusting relationships, humility, and openness, ESO members begin to generate new thinking, forge unexpected collaborations, and discover innovative pathways for change — outcomes that only emerge from the collective intelligence and creativity of the group.

The network approach empowers ESOs to enhance the value of membership, allowing educators to actively shape the support they receive. While the principles of this approach can be widely adopted, they are not a blueprint for organizational change. Rather than a prescriptive program, the network approach is a guiding framework — a way to engage with the world and with each other. ESOs and their members have the freedom to interpret and apply this approach in various ways. Though we cannot predict precisely what outcomes will emerge in every ESO, those that commit to the principles of a network approach — prioritizing relationships, practicing humility, promoting openness, and preparing for emergence — have the potential to unlock benefits that ripple throughout the system.

Stronger networks of education professionals lead to better knowledge mobilization, which breaks down silos and elevates promising practices across the field. Over time, this cultivates a more coherent and coordinated educational ecosystem where professionals from diverse roles, backgrounds, and experiences can unite to address systemic challenges and advance educational equity. In a field historically slow to innovate, ESOs that champion a network approach have the power to catalyze transformative change.

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