

State of the Field of Network Leadership Development

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Abstract

This article explores core themes of network leadership, collective impact, and capacity building for systems change, as discussed in a “*State of the Field*” panel at the Transformations Conference 2023. Leading system change experts examined the training of systems leaders, essential competencies, and challenges to the field. They suggested team-based and reflective leadership strategies and discussed entry points for early-career professionals. The panelists also shared their transformative experiences in network leadership, highlighting the need to develop more opportunities for systemic change capacity-building in the Global South and other underserved communities.

Introduction

In this “*State of the Field*” session, the panelists delved into the evolving landscape of network leadership development. Leading experts convened to explore the impact of this practice and the potential for collaboration among practitioners. The session was organized in partnership with the Fito Network, an organization committed to building thriving and long-lasting networks for social and transformational impact.

The Panel

Liz Weaver is the co-CEO of Tamarack Institute, an organization that champions collective impact and collaborative leadership. Under her guidance, the Tamarack Learning Centre focuses on enhancing community change leadership. Liz describes network leadership as being at the core of Tamarack's operations, even if not always labelled as such. Emphasizing equity, inclusivity, and the importance of involving those directly affected by the issues, Tamarack has

witnessed the transformative power of collective action, evidenced by the notable reduction in Canada's poverty rate.

Russ Gaskin is the Managing Member of CoCreative, a consultancy that has nurtured nearly 60 impact networks aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. By contrasting the 'program mind' with the 'network mind,' Russ highlights the rising significance of a collaborative, collective decision-making approach. His journey into network leadership highlighted the necessity of embracing and leveraging differences for systemic change. This has led CoCreative to celebrate differences and support collaborations to harness them for deeper innovation.

Nono Sekhoto is a multifaceted leader with a background in financial services, farming, and global agricultural stakeholder engagement. As a key advocate for youth in agriculture, she believes in the power of networks to unlock vast opportunities. Through her work with the African Leadership Academy and training from the "*Converge Network Leadership Series*," Nono has refined her skills to efficiently support and cultivate network relationships, underlining the importance of trust and mutual understanding.

Kerstin Tebbe, the founder of Collective Mind, has dedicated two decades to backing networks and multi-stakeholder collaboration. She views network leadership as a unique blend of mindset, skill set, and approach that differs from conventional norms. Having worked within a global network, Kerstin realized the need for specialized understanding to operate effectively in such environments. With Collective Mind, she aims to bridge the gap between individuals in the network field, fostering collective learning and promoting innovative network practices to drive change.

Bruce Evan Goldstein serves as the Lead Weaver of the Transformations Community and Associate Professor at the University of Colorado Boulder in the Program in Environmental Design. He deeply values the TC and is dedicated to nurturing it. His research and practice focus on supporting transformative networks and communities.

The Transformations Community and Conference

The Transformations Community is a global network of action-oriented researchers and reflective practitioners who support transformations to just, sustainable, and regenerative futures. The community consists of experienced researchers and professionals from diverse backgrounds, including sustainability-oriented academic programs, government, intergovernmental agencies, research institutes, non-profit organizations, consulting firms, and foundations. The Transformations Community organizes dialogues, workshops, and communities of practice to enable practitioners to bring desirable transformations to life. Since 2013, the Transformations Community has hosted biennial conferences in Norway, Sweden, Scotland, Chile, and online during the pandemic in 2021. These events are deliberately transdisciplinary and seek to provide a creative and welcoming space for transformation researchers and professionals to come together in dialogue and practice. The 2023 conference was in Sydney, Australia, with a simultaneous online conference and a European Hub Conference in Prague, Czechia, followed

by the North American Hub Workshop in Portland, Maine. The global theme was “Partnerships for a better future,” the 2023 conference program offered 250+ sessions, participation from 40+ countries, 700+ attendees, and insights shared by 400+ speakers. The panel on Systems Education was part of an open-access “*State of the Field*” series, which aimed to explore core ideas and practices in the field of sustainability transformations.

Dialogue About the State of the Field of Network Leadership Development

Transformative Network Leadership

Summary:

- *To effectively implement transformative network leadership, practice patience to appreciate incremental progress.*
- *Adopt an inclusive, long-term vision and employ a holistic approach that addresses underlying systemic issues, such as structural racism.*

The discussion began with some of the nuances that differentiate transformative network leadership from traditional network leadership. Nono highlighted the importance of patience in the transformation process. *"I have come to realize that you need to step back... celebrating the incremental progress made along the way,"* she reflected. Reflection is essential to ensuring that efforts remain aligned with the transformation goals.

Liz brought forth the inclusive model used at Tamarack. She emphasized that transformation goes beyond immediate actions and encompasses equity and place-based approaches. *"It is essential to focus both on immediate transformative actions and the long view of transformation,"* Liz asserted. For her, the key to transformative change lies in harnessing diverse voices, particularly those that are often overlooked. Liz sees the potential in local initiatives as catalysts for systemic changes. Transformation is about having the capacity to zoom in on the problem or opportunity in the local context and then zoom out to understand the system-level impacts and opportunities.

Russ addressed the deeply-rooted issue of structural racism in the dominant US health system. *"A transformational goal should be expansive and address the issue's root cause,"* he noted. This requires understanding challenges in all their complexity and resistance to easy fixes and engaging a diverse group of stakeholders to identify leverage points for change.

Skills for Network Leaders

Summary:

- *Network leadership requires coordination and facilitation, emphasizing collective action, self-reflection, and navigating system complexities.*
- *To be comfortable with uncertainty, ensuring network purpose continuity and promoting collective problem-solving rather than imposing solutions.*

The conversation shifted to the core purpose of a network. "*Networks are necessary when the transformation we seek cannot be achieved alone. Instead, the transformation requires collective action and collaboration,*" Kerstin elaborated. She stressed that the crux of network leadership revolves around coordination and facilitation. For a network to effect system-level transformations, leaders must prioritize self-reflection personal growth, and adeptly navigate the inherent complexities of such systems.

Nono and Russ resonated with this sentiment. They believe that network leaders must find comfort amidst uncertainty and ensure the continuity of the network's purpose, even in their absence. Nono further explained, "*The essence of network leadership is being comfortable amidst complexity and uncertainty, allowing for emergence without rigid expectations.*" The goal is not to impose solutions but to present challenges to the network, allowing for collective problem-solving.

Entryways into Network Leadership

Summary:

- *Personal transformative experiences shape individuals into network leaders.*
- *Self-awareness, understanding biases, and navigating between immediate actions and systemic strategies are fundamental to successful network leadership.*

As the discussion deepened, Bruce inquired about the personal journeys that shaped each speaker into the network leaders they are today. Liz recounted a moving narrative about leading a community project to combat poverty. The dedication to transformation and sacrifices she saw from individuals profoundly affected her. Effective network leadership is fundamentally about engaging others in sharing their passion for the collective goal.

Russ experienced the systemic discrimination perpetuated by dominant economic systems during his time at his grandmother's shelter for marginalized groups. Observing these systems and their powerful influences ultimately ignited his passion for collaborative system transformation. Kerstin's path was marked by her experiences with networks early in her career. Her growing fascination with network leadership and therapy led her to realize the significance of relationships, the foundation of networks.

Concluding their discourse on personal experiences, Russ pointed out the critical role of self-awareness in network leadership. "*Understanding our biases and preferences is crucial. If not, we unconsciously influence group dynamics towards our preferences,*" he explained. Navigating between polarities, such as the need for immediate action versus systemic change strategy, is essential. Recognizing one's biases is where the real strength and success of network leadership lie.

Early Careers in the Field

Summary:

- *Exposure to the field through internships and hands-on experiences is crucial for young professionals entering the field of network leadership.*
- *Network leadership is versatile and multidisciplinary, requiring a flexible approach and rejecting a 'one-size-fits-all' skill set.*

The realm of network leadership, while an old concept, has evolved to become a recognized professional field and an exciting path for those who are keen to guide motivated networks toward systemic change. Bruce asked the panelists what advice they might give to young leaders in the field of network leadership. Nono, who has actively mentored the younger generation, emphasizes the importance of understanding the profession. She noted, *“For me, it is about exposure first.”* Through internships and hands-on experiences, she supports young professionals in the world of network leadership from the start.

Building on this, Kerstin expanded on the aspect of diverse experiences. Unlike traditional fields that require specific qualifications, network leadership thrives on versatility. She suggests a flexible approach, encouraging newcomers to find their unique niche. However, they must realize that network leadership is multidisciplinary. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' skill set.

Professionalizing Network Leadership

Summary:

- *Professionalizing network leadership can unintentionally marginalize skilled individuals without specific credentials or resources.*
- *Embracing a team-based approach in network leadership allows for diverse skills and challenges conventional perceptions, though the lack of funding remains an obstacle.*

While network practices have ancient roots, their modern counterpart, with structured courses, advisory services, and specialized programs, showcase the growth and recognition of the field. An advantage of network leadership is that there is no need to "reinvent the wheel" with each iteration.

However, Kerstin expressed the concern that *"Professionalizing the field can unintentionally shut out those without specific credentials, even if they are passionate and skilled."* This could unintentionally prioritize certain voices over others. Russ shed light on the disparities in the development of network practices, pointing out the consistent lack of funding in networks, particularly in certain regions.

To navigate these challenges, Nono proposed a novel perspective. She emphasized the value of viewing network leadership from a team-based lens rather than an individual-centric one. She stated, *"There is value in coming into a network as a team rather than an individual."* This

approach promotes a wide range of skills and challenges traditional perceptions of network leadership.

Kerstin observed that these team-based approaches are difficult to realize due to the persistent challenge of securing adequate funding. Nono concurred, mentioning that she often leans on her interns for team-based network leadership. The panel was keen on joining forces to secure more substantial funding. They particularly highlighted the importance of distributing financial resources more equitably across different communities. *"By investing in diverse ways of thinking and holistic systemic change, we enrich the entire field,"* Russ remarked.

Sociopolitical Dynamics and their Impact on Networks

Summary:

- *The current sociopolitical landscape, characterized by polarization and "post-truth" dynamics, both challenges collective transformations and intensifies the human desire for genuine collaborations.*

Towards the end, the panelists discussed the profound implications on network leadership of the current sociopolitical landscape, marked by polarization and the emergence of a "post-truth" era. In response to the consequences, Kerstin observed that such dynamics might intensify the drive for collaboration due to our innate human desire for genuine connection. Nono echoed this sentiment by emphasizing, *"Ultimately, we all want to be connected to other people."* Rather than seeking connections for recreation, the contemporary environment is pushing people to unite with a specific purpose – to achieve meaningful objectives that resonate deeply with them.

How the Transformations Community Can Support the Field

The Transformations Community can assist the reach and impact of network leadership development in two ways in particular. The panel underscored the power of collaborative efforts, suggesting experienced professionals offer guidance to emerging network leaders. Initiatives like dialogues, workshops, and peer-to-peer support organized by the Transformations Community and partners can effectively benefit network leaders. Furthermore, the panelists drew attention to the ongoing challenge of securing funding, pointing towards collaborative advocacy to amplify financial support for network leadership. It is crucial to ensure the equitable distribution of resources among geographical locations. For the Transformations Community, this presents an opportunity to connect network leaders and organizations with potential sources.

Next Steps and Ways to Connect

The **Fito Network** is weaving a diverse coalition of network leaders, community coordinators, and funders to support and valorize networks for their transformational impact around the globe.

The **Tamarack Institute** is a dynamic organization that develops and supports collaborative

strategies that engage citizens and institutions to solve major community challenges. For more, visit tamarackcommunity.ca.

CoCreative specializes in developing multi-stakeholder collective impact networks to solve complex problems with human-centric and systemic approaches. Find out more and access free tools and resources at wearecocreative.com.

African Leadership Academy (ALA) is a pre-eminent educational institution that seeks to transform Africa by identifying, developing, and connecting its future leaders. Discover their initiatives here: africanleadershipacademy.org.

Collective Mind support networks and the people who work for and with networks to be more effective and impactful. Connect with them at collectivemindglobal.org.

If you are not a member of the **Transformations Community** and wish to be part of this global network of reflective practitioners and action researchers, join the community at transformationscommunity.org.

Conclusion

This panel of network leadership experts shared their perspectives on the state of the field. Drawing from the in-depth discussions, the following insights can be concluded.

- To excel in transformative network leadership, you must gain a deep understanding of the existing systems to ensure that you are addressing the root causes and not merely treating symptoms. This enables the development of sustainable and just transformations.
- Early in your career, seek out mentorship opportunities, broaden your exposure, and identify your unique role within the network.
- Collaboration should be the cornerstone: work together to navigate challenges, consolidate resources, and elevate the entire field of practice.
- Inclusion is key—help the network leverage diverse voices and perspectives not only to enrich the dialogue but also to create meaningful and lasting change.
- On a personal level, make self-awareness and introspection a continuous practice, as this will shape your leadership approach and influence dynamics within your network.
- Be mindful of the changing sociopolitical landscape and be prepared to adapt your strategies and approaches according to potential polarities.

In essence, network leaders are encouraged to balance a focus on individual growth, a comprehensive systemic understanding, and a commitment to collective action. These guidelines can provide a strong foundation for navigating the complexities and challenges of transformative network leadership.

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