

Exploring network patterns

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Understand common patterns of connections between people and how they impact the way they can work together

What is made possible? By relating their own experience to prototypical network patterns, groups can get a deeper understanding of how they work together (or not) and what the opportunities and challenges of each of the different patterns of self-organization are. Also, these patterns give group members a language to talk about how they experience collaboration, what they appreciate or struggle with and what kind of network structure they prefer. In many cases this will be more of an exploration and an exercise to understand other's preferences better – because every pattern carries challenges and opportunities, there is no one perfect solution for the group to discover.

Five Structural Elements – Min Specs

1. Structuring Invitation

- Invite participants to explore which network patterns they are working in and what opportunities and challenges these patterns carry.

2. How Space is Arranged and Materials Needed

- A large enough space without chairs for participants to mill about and talk in pairs and small groups
- A table at one side of the room to spread several sets of network pattern cards
- Network pattern cards (see collateral materials, about 4-5 times as many as participants)

3. How Participation is Distributed

- Everyone in the group has an equal opportunity to contribute

4. How Groups are Configured

- Start alone, then in pairs, then in larger groups (everyone who picked the same pattern in one group) and finally as a whole group

5. Sequence of Steps and Time Allocation

- Facilitator spreads network pattern cards on large table and invites participants to have a look (2 min)
- Facilitator invites participants to pick one pattern which they can relate to by asking: “Which of these patterns reminds you of the way this group works?” Or: “Pick one pattern that speaks to you because you love working this way?” or: “Pick one pattern which reflects a difficult experience you have had when working with others.” (2 min)
- Silent writing / self reflection: What is the situation this card reminds you of? What are some challenges and opportunities you experience when working in a structure like this? (3 min)
- Share in pairs – picking a partner who has picked a different pattern (5 min) – possibly two rounds

- Form a group with all participants who have picked the same pattern. Discuss the challenges and opportunities of your pattern and explore how it can look different from different perspectives (6 min)
- Sharing in the large group: What were some main insights you had which can guide the way we work together? (6 min)

6. Why? Purposes

- Develop “network intuition” to allow participants to detect patterns in the ways we connect and understand the opportunities and challenges these patterns bring
- Give groups a common language to make explicit how we work together and how we would want to work together, so that the group can take ownership of these patterns of interaction instead of passively enduring them
- Understand that there is no perfect pattern but rather that different patterns work for different purposes, they feel differently depending on which position you have in the pattern and different people have different preferences

7. Tips and Traps

- Encourage participants to explore those aspects of a pattern they don’t immediately see: If they picked a pattern they really suffered in, what are some benefits and opportunities of this pattern? If they picked a pattern they really like, what are some challenges of this pattern? Does it look different if you have a different position in the pattern (e.g. whether you are in the center or periphery)?
- Set the tone to reduce judging and open participants’ minds to the thought that there is no right or wrong (good or evil) pattern.
- Don’t be seduced into over-explaining but encourage participants to take what they see and interpret it the way they need to tell their story.
- Use perforated postcards to make printing pattern cards easier

8. Riffs and Variations

- Use pattern cards with or without titles. Also, you may print them two sided, one side without title (which is what the participants see when picking the cards) and one with title (which gives them a name for the pattern to talk about it)
- Invite participants to pick two cards, one for the current and one for a desired pattern
- Invite participants to pick two cards, one for the official and one for the real pattern
- Provide blank cards along with the pattern cards and invite participants to pick one card which reminds them of a current situation and draw the desired situation on the blank card
- While the cards below show very common patterns, don’t hesitate to add your own, based on experience or specific challenges the group faces

9. Examples

- Public sector leaders in Accra will use network pattern exploration to diagnose the challenges they face in working together to improve sanitation
- For teams to improve the way collaboration is structured, taking all team members’ perspective into account

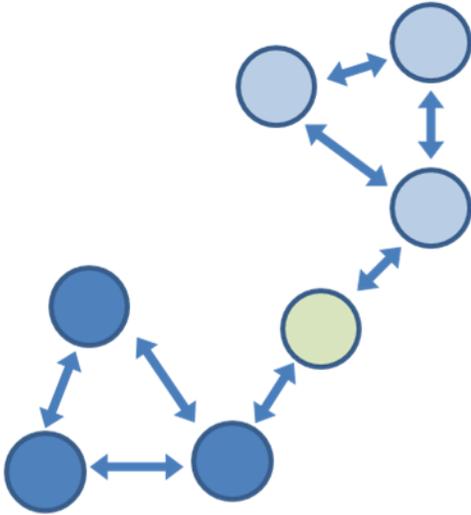
- To accompany change processes, develop a vision of how we want to work together in the future and check-in throughout the process, whether we have reached this pattern and whether we think it actually does what we need
- To structure conversations across levels in organizations to improve understanding and compassion for the challenges that different patterns pose for people in different positions
- For consultants to help them increase their network intuition and to collaboratively diagnose the patterns of relationships in the organization they are working with.

Attribution: Developed by Eva Schiffer

Collateral Material

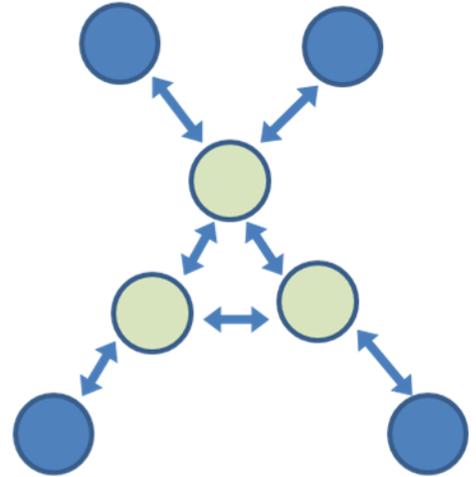
Below: Network Pattern cards, four cards fit on one letter size piece of carton

A Bridge to the Outside World:
Boundary Spanner



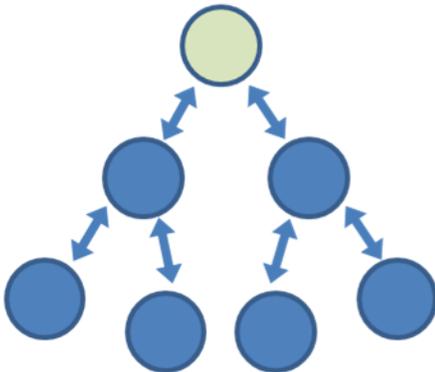
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The Inner Circle:
Core-Periphery Network



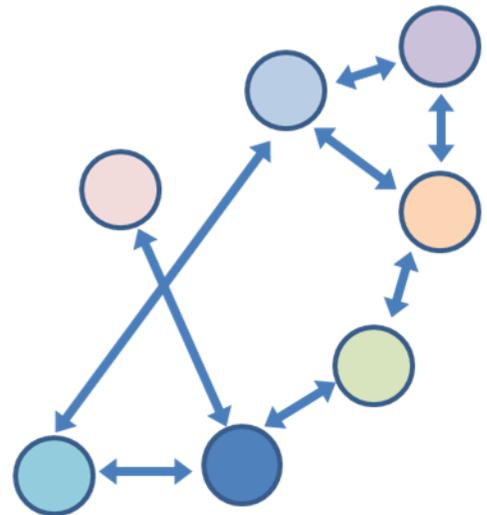
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The Boss is the Boss:
Strict Hierarchy



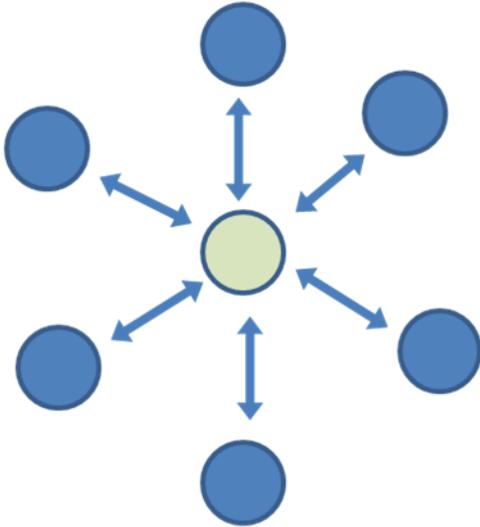
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Celebrating Diversity:
Heterogeneous Network



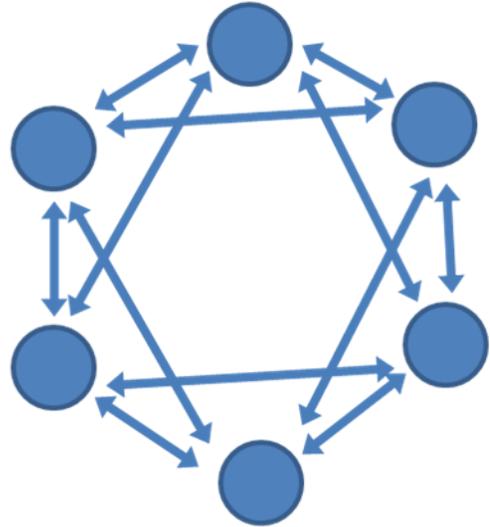
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It's all about you:
Hub and Spoke Network



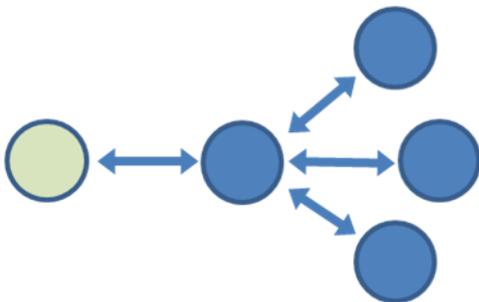
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Everybody Holding Hands:
Cohesive Clique



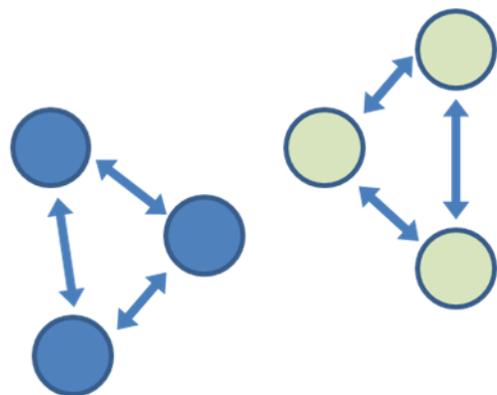
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Who Gets Past the Dragon?
Gate-Keeper



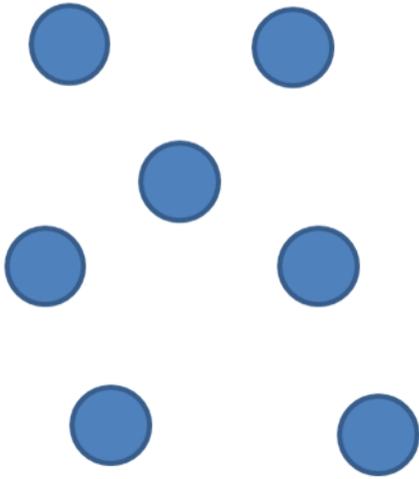
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Birds of a Feather:
Homogeneous Coalitions



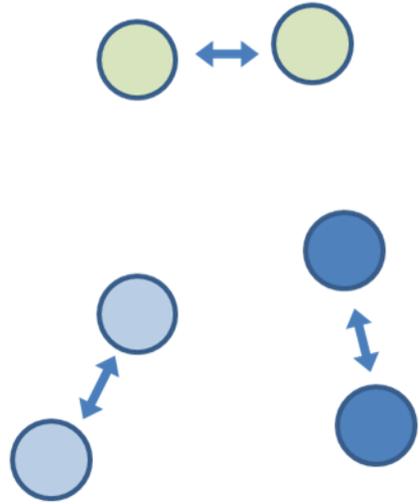
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Everyone for themselves
Disconnected individuals



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Lonesome twosomes
Disconnected pairs



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