

Introduction

A network is a group of people, working across organizational and/or geographic boundaries, who collectively create, apply and test solutions to one or more common challenges.

This document is the first iteration of a handbook designed to help network sponsors and leaders design, launch and operate effective networks. It is based principally on experience of The Nature Conservancy.

This initial iteration includes *Standards* and *Guidance on Good Practice* for designing and operating effective networks. The seven standards are conditions that we have found to be essential for success. For each standard, we have briefly described practices that can help ensure that a network meets that particular condition for success.

Further development of this package will incorporate:

- more in-depth guidance on Good Practice;
- references and links to tools;
- case studies; and
- contacts with expertise related to each standard.

Standard 1. Clear Strategic Purpose.

The network has clear goals and measurable outcomes and/or milestones, which are understood by its members, sponsor(s), funder(s), and other key stakeholders.

Rationale

The goal(s) of a network give(s) prospective members a basis for determining whether to participate, provide a basis for selecting members, and drive the design of network activities. Explicitly stated measurable outcomes and/or milestones are essential for gauging a network’s effectiveness by its members, leader(s), sponsor(s) and donor(s) (see Standard 5).

Good Practice

Assessing Need and Defining Goal(s). Engage prospective members and other stakeholders in assessing and defining the need for a network. This scoping process will require consulting prospective members concerning goals and other key questions of network design. Define the goal(s) of the network, and determine whether a network is the most cost-effective way to achieve it/them (see table below). Determine the network’s duration, appropriate to achieve its goal(s), recognizing that the term may require adjustment.

Defining Outcomes and Milestones. Engage members and other stakeholders in assessing and defining outcomes and milestones. It may not be possible, or desirable, to define measurable outcomes at the outset of a network. Particularly if the network’s goal is to solve a complex problem, its members may need to develop a shared understanding of the problem and to develop solutions through experimentation and learning before measurable outcomes can be articulated. Measurable milestones (activity and output measures) provide a framework for gauging progress.

Needs that may be met by a network	A network may be warranted if . . .	Alternatives to a network	Examples of measurable milestones
Strengthen the capacity of members to adapt and use proven methods, tools, strategies or approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building the capacity requires transfer of tacit knowledge and/or ongoing technical support. • Sharing experience and know-how among members will accelerate effective adoption. • Adoption requires cultural change. • The challenges facing members are similar. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training • Mentoring • One-on-one technical assistance 	By July 2009, 30 members will have incorporated credible ecosystem services objectives into their shellfish restoration projects, and will have begun to monitor them.
Create best practices and the know-how to use them, by innovating, testing and documenting new strategies, methods, tools, or approaches	• The practice addresses a challenge common to many programs or projects. The practice(s) must be tested in multiple situations to be adequately validated.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single-site demonstration project • Cross-boundary project team 	By July 2010 demonstrate and document, in 18 markets, an effective strategy to engage the nursery industry in preventing invasions of alien species.
Conceive and coordinate actions, across boundaries, to achieve particular objectives.	• Cross-boundary learning or knowledge-sharing is required.	• Cross-boundary project team	By July 2010 strategies for restoring Pacific salmon will be implemented in 35 priority watersheds.

Standard 2. Effective Leadership.

The network has explicitly identified leadership with appropriate skills and sufficient time allocated to this role to adaptively manage activities that will meet the network's objectives.

Rationale

Whether embodied in an individual or a team, effective leadership is required to focus members' collective attention and effort on the network's purpose, to engage members in activities that help them resolve their individual as well as collective challenges, and to ensure accountability for results to members, sponsor(s), donor(s) and other key stakeholders.

Good Practice

Leadership Functions. Effective network leadership comprises several crucial functions. A network leader, or leadership team, must possess the skills, and have sufficient time allocated, to perform all of these functions well:

- Defining and adapting the network's objectives, in collaboration with its members and sponsor(s);
- Energizing members around the network's objectives, and building community among them;
- Establishing, in collaboration with members, behavioral norms related to member participation and contribution, orientation to results, and constructive peer-critique;
- Assessing the needs of network members, and ensuring that network activities are well-designed and facilitated to meet these needs (see Standard 4);
- Mobilizing resources, including funding and expertise external to the network (see Standard 7);
- Ensuring that network products or outputs are documented and distributed, widely and effectively; and
- Measuring the network's effectiveness and results (see Standard 5).

Leadership Skills. The leadership functions listed above require both content and process expertise. Designing an effective network activity, for example a workshop, requires process design and facilitation skills as well as knowledge of the content to be addressed. Process design and facilitation expertise is necessary to select and design the specific decision-making or learning methods to be used. These choices, however, cannot be made independent of content. The number and structure of steps required in each workshop session, for example, and the time necessary to execute them, pivot on content.

It is not common to find the requisite content and process expertise embodied in one individual. Thus, it might be necessary to assemble a leadership team of two or more individuals who collectively embody the skills required for effective network leadership.

Process expertise is required on a more continual basis than is content expertise, and the content expertise required for network leadership is often general. As implied by the list of functions above, the greater part of network leadership is procedural. Members often bring to a network much of the content expertise required to meet its objectives. The expertise embodied in network leader(s) and members can be augmented as needed by engaging specialists.

Level of Effort. The level of effort required to perform the leadership role effectively varies with the number of network members and the intensity of network activity (e.g. frequency of network meetings, volume of network product, and extent of capacity-building activities that are to be carried out between meetings). Expect to allocate a minimum of 0.30 FTE to network leadership, and as much as 2 FTE.

Standard 3. Committed Membership.

The network's members are personally committed to the network's objectives and to sharing know-how; and their organization or program explicitly authorizes their participation.

Rationale

The members are the network, and its results pivot on their effective participation. To achieve their intended results, networks typically depend on members to work individually and collectively. The level of effort required of members often is considerable, and it should be explicitly incorporated into their annual performance objectives. A very substantial share of a network's value to its members is created through sharing of know-how and lessons-learned among its members. Thus members' willingness and ability to share what they know and what they are learning is an essential factor in network success.

Good Practice

Determining Network Size and Geographic Scope. Network size and scope – the number of members and where they work – are a function of network objectives and of resources available. Effective networks range in size from fewer than 20 members to greater than 100 members. Geographic scope may be national, regional or global. Greater size and scope, generally require greater resources and present greater leadership, support and design challenges. If the number of members exceeds 100, or if some members must travel more than one day to participate in network activities, consider enlisting members into smaller sub-networks, in which most collective activity takes place.

Selecting Members. Use the network's objectives to develop selection criteria, which might include:

- Alignment of prospective member's needs and know-how with the network's objectives;
- Prospective member's geographic location;
- The habitat type a prospective member works in;
- Priority threats of concern to a prospective member;
- Influence of a prospective member, e.g., involvement in other collaborative activities;
- Readiness to use the network to advance their own and collective practice; and/or
- Complementary skills and expertise across the entire membership.

Enlisting, among the network's initial or "founding" members, at least two or three exemplary practitioners helps to create a culture of success and achievement within the network.

Enlisting Members. Be sure that members understand explicitly what membership will require of them (e.g. level of effort, frequency of meetings, duration of the network), and what they can expect to gain from it. Consider using a written member agreement to ensure that their understanding is explicit. Member commitment to a network's objectives is commonly tentative during the initial stage of its operation, particularly concerning objectives focused on results beyond their own work situations. Although it is crucial to enlist members with sufficient commitment to participate and contribute, expect to grow commitment through well-designed and executed network activities (see Standard 4).

Loosely-Linked Affiliations. In some instances there may reason to encourage individuals to affiliate loosely with the network. For example, if the network's objectives include innovating and distributing a solution to a particular challenge, encouraging potential users of that solution to engage "around the edges" of the network may accelerate adoption of the solution. Such loose affiliation might include subscription to a network's listserv, participation in on-line discussions, or peer-reviewing network products.

Standard 4. Well-Designed and Executed Activities.

Network activities are well designed and facilitated to create and share know-how among network members, and to help them resolve individual and collective challenges.

Rationale

A network’s activities are the principal means of ensuring that a network benefits its members and achieves its objectives. They are the principal determinant of network costs as well as benefits. Well-designed and executed activities with clear objectives are essential for sustaining member commitment.

Good Practice

Assess Individual and Collective Needs. Continually assess members’ challenges, and design network activities specifically to help members resolve them. Such assessment can be accomplished relatively informally through conversations with members and/or through group discussions. Or it can be more systematic, for example using structured interviews, surveys, or self-assessment tools.

Design Activities to Meet Members’ Needs. A variety of activities can be effective for creating and sharing know-how among network members, and they can often be used in combination. The following table lists examples of activities. These more formal activities should be complemented by planned social activities that foster unrestrained creative thinking and strengthening relationships among network members.

Activity	Application Example
Multi-site experiments to develop and/or test practice(s)	The Aridlands Grazing Network is conducting a ten-year experiment to determine effective ways to manage the interaction of prescribed fire and grazing.
Action training, in which participants are introduced to a new skill or technique and apply it, getting real work done as they learn	The Efrogmson Coaches Network uses action training to build practitioner capacity for Conservation Action Planning.
Peer-exchanges, in which one or more members share know-how at the work site of another member, helping the latter resolve a challenge	A member of Micronesians in Island Conservation helped a colleague in another country train 20 conservation officers and develop legislation for marine protected areas.
Peer-review, in which a work product or work-in-progress is evaluated against standards of practice	Grassland Restoration Network members peer-review each others’ work, and offer peer-review to non-members.
After Action Review, in which the results of an action are assessed against intended results to increase the effectiveness of future action	The Latin American Private Lands Conservation Network used AAR to draw lessons from the execution of land deals, and to define standards and best practices.
Facilitated discussions to solve a clearly-defined individual or common challenge	Micronesians in Island Conservation dedicates a portion of every member retreat to defining and solving common challenges its members face, producing local, national and region-wide solutions.

Standard 5. Measurement and Adaptive Management.

The network measures its progress and results, evaluates them against its intended milestones and outcomes, and adapts its course accordingly.

Rationale.

Evaluating the effectiveness of the network's activities, both local and collective, and tracking its progress toward its goals, provide feedback that is essential in assessing the overall effectiveness of the network. This assessment allows the network leader(s) and members to adjust its plans to better meet its purpose.

Good Practice.

Evaluate Activities. Following a network activity, assess how well it met member needs, and how subsequent activities can be designed to meet their needs better. This assessment can be based on written or oral evaluations, or both. Consider conducting an After Action Review (AAR) immediately following an activity. AAR is typically framed by questions like these:

- What did we expect to be the key factors in ensuring that participants benefited from the activity?
- What were our results, in terms of participant satisfaction, and why did we get those results?
- What factors will we employ again in future activities, and what will we do differently?

Evaluate Progress. Evaluating a network's progress requires assessing its activities and their immediate results over a period of time, and comparing them to the measurable milestones and results that reflect its purpose or goals (see Standard 1). Some of the types of questions that might be asked to evaluate progress include:

- In the past year, how many network members completed, in their local work situation, the planned activities associated with the network?
- To what extent are those "local" activities having the intended near-term results?
- In the past year, to what extent did the network complete the collective activities that were planned?
- To what extent are those collective activities having the intended near-term results?
- To the extent we are not achieving the results intended, why not?
- What adjustments do we think would yield better results?

Evaluate Outcomes. The ultimate outcomes expected of a network may take years to achieve (see Standard 1). For example, if a network's purpose is to increase the pace, scale and effectiveness of fisheries restoration, its outcomes likely will not be ripe for measure for a few years. Thus measurement of network outcomes will be less frequent than evaluation of activities and measurement and evaluation of network progress.

At a minimum, outcomes should be measured at the termination of a network. The extent to which the network achieved its intended purpose, as well as conclusions concerning why it did or did not, should be reported to members, sponsor(s) and donor(s). Ideally this information would also be shared with other network leaders. In the case of networks focused on conservation practice this information might take the form of a case study published through the Conservation by Design Gateway.

Standard 6. Documentation of Lessons-Learned.

The network documents activities, results, and the lessons learned from them.

Rationale

In an effective network, members document and share with each other information about the actions they take, the results of those actions, and the lessons learned from both. The network also documents the lessons learned from collective action and results. Documentation allows members to access information about lessons learned whenever they need it. It also makes it possible to share know-how created through the network more broadly, leveraging the investment in the network by improving the practices of others.

Good Practice

Packaging Lessons Learned. The know-how created through a network, the lessons learned through local and collective actions and results, may take a variety of forms and may be documented and packaged in a variety of ways. Examples include:

- reports of local actions, results, and conclusions about what did and did not work and why;
- reports of collective actions, results, and conclusions about what did and did not work and why;
- proceedings of network meetings or workshops; and/or
- standards and guidance for good practice, based on lessons learned in multiple situations.

Sharing Lessons Learned. Some networks use independent websites or Conserveonline workspaces to distribute the products of their learning. Examples include:

- US Fire Learning Network http://www.tncfire.org/training_usfln.htm
- Western Invasives Learning Network <http://tncweeds.ucdavis.edu/networks/western/western.html>
- Shellfish Restoration Network <http://conserveonline.org/workspaces/shellfish>

The Nature Conservancy recently launched the Conservation by Design Gateway (<http://conserveonline.org/workspaces/cbdgateway>), an online portal to distribute conservation know-how. The Gateway is a vehicle for distribution of case studies, tools and methods related to implementing Conservation by Design.

Additional channels of distribution include publication (e.g., journal articles, handbooks, etc.) and presentations at conferences or meetings.

Deploying Network Members. Although online and in-print distribution of network products may ensure extensive reach, it often is not sufficient to ensure effective adoption and use of network products. This is particularly so when adoption of a new practice requires knowledge that cannot be readily documented, such as how to adapt a practice to a unique situation. To ensure widespread adoption of network products, it may be necessary for network members to coach prospective users.

Standard 7. Adequate Resources.

The network’s resources are sufficient to achieve its purpose.

Rationale

Effective networks often entail substantial costs, whether those are aggregated into a single budget or, as is more common, shared by the sponsor and members. Frequently these costs must be covered over multiple years, if the network’s objectives are to be met. To ensure that the network is able to complete the work required to achieve its purpose, the resources required should be reasonably assured before launching the network.

Good Practice

Scoping and Design Costs. Developing a network generally requires considerable activity and some cost prior to securing sufficient funds to launch it. During this scoping and design phase, needs are assessed, purpose is defined, prospective members are identified, and resource requirements are determined. This phase will require a deliberate consultation process and may require convening prospective members. Wait until you have assurance of resources before initiating the second phase – launch and operation.

Launch and Operation Costs. Determine the activities and other cost factors that will be required to achieve the network’s objectives, and how these costs will be distributed (see table below). The costs of a network are usually shared by the sponsor and the members. For example, the sponsor and the donors enlisted by the sponsor, may finance some or all of the costs of members’ travel to participate in collective network activities. On the other hand, very rarely does the budget for a network cover the time contributed by members. The distribution of costs will be very important in prospective members’ calculation of the cost/benefit of participation. The cost of participation should be clear to members and their organizations or programs.

Principal Cost Factors	Typical Responsibility
Network Leadership 0.03 to 1.0+ full time equivalent Determined by frequency and scope of network activity, and extent of network support between collective activities (e.g. site visits, one-on-one coaching, etc.)	Network sponsor
Collective Network Activities Member time Member transportation, meals and lodging	Members Network sponsor, members, or shared
Local Activities to Advance Network Objectives E.g., member effort and costs to apply and test practice “at home”	Members, network sponsor, or shared
Network Support E.g., research, communication, website development and maintenance, meeting logistics, etc.	Network sponsor
Peer Assists/Exchanges, Peer-Reviews Time and travel of participating members.	Network sponsor, members, or shared
Documentation and Distribution of Network Products E.g., capturing lessons-learned, documenting good practice, translating for users worldwide, and distributing them	Network sponsor
External expertise E.g., specialist engaged for a specific activity, such as a workshop session or technical assistance to members	Network sponsor