

Synthesis of Discussion Topic 3: Assessing the performance of networks

Topic discussed from Monday June 1 to Friday July 3, 2009

Introduction to topic:

To date, evaluators have adapted their existing "tool box" for evaluating networks. However, networks are special types of organizational forms, sharing some common characteristics that make conventional approaches to evaluation often suboptimal, thus reducing the learning potential of the evaluation process and results.

Topic Question:

When assessing the performance of networks, what are the major learning outcomes evaluators should pay most attention?

Lessons learned from comments received:

This issue obtained a wide range of responses. One contributor suggested that because goals of members are often misaligned with that of the network, difficulties might arise. A second contributor argued that this is similar to that of individuals who work within organizations. He reminded us that individual misalignment with organizational goals also present problems; particularly in relation to transaction costs. Another post suggests that because of the permeable boundaries of organizational networks, agency theory might be a useful tool for evaluation.

In another thread we are reminded about the important role that leadership plays. The post suggest a recent research article indicating that there are 4 types of leadership networks - the issue is how ought this affect the evaluation of networks.

From our perspective the evaluation of networks seems like a topic people want to talk about - we will bring some questions back in a few weeks - keep looking.

Comments received:

Submitted by charles on Fri, 06/26/2009 - 11:15:

Networks are relatively new organizational forms. They are goal driven like other organizations however, unlike other organizations the goals of the member organizations often play an extremely important role in the functioning of the networks. How ought this influence be taken into account when assessing the utility or performance of a network?

Submitted by Mustapha Malki on Sun, 06/28/2009 - 13:38:

In one my recent experiences on evaluation, I had to assess the objectives' achievement of a 4-year project funded by an European organisation which aimed at setting a research-development network in the Maghreb region, including the 3 countries of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. This initiative came with the feeling of "again, another network!". However, one of the striking points we learned from that networking experience is that, depending on the substance of the planning phase, a network can be oriented towards a more sustainable organisation or not. In this case, people who participated in the planning workshop 4 years before became aware that there is an urgent need to differentiate between the foundation of a sustainable network and the actual source of funding advocating the setup of the network (the European organisation). The planning workshop went on to discuss issues of institutionalisation and governance of the network vis-a-vis the issue of autonomy and sustainability of the network. Here comes the essential point of my contribution. Sustainability of networks should not be perceived as searching for "still-alive" structures or organisations. Because networks in this context are social, evaluating networking experiences should lead us to unveil the social relations and linkages that such experiences have setup and how these relations and linkages are still stronger even after funding of these experiences have ended. In the case of the aforementioned Maghreb network, years after the European organisation's funding ended, the remnants of the network are still visible (Maghreb research teams still develop regional projects and look for funding within and outside the region).

In this perspective, sustainability of networks must be assessed through the capacity of resettlement of the organizational structure of the network once there is a new opportunity of funding that appears, given that the social foundations are already there. I would dare to suggest the concept of "network resilience" in this context.

Submitted by [Claire Reinelt](#) (see home page: <http://link-to-results.com>) on Mon, 06/29/2009 - 11:40:

Bruce Hoppe and I recently wrote a paper that is forthcoming in Leadership Quarterly on "Using Social Network Analysis to Evaluate Leadership Networks." We identified four types of leadership networks and the types of outcomes that are associated with each type. We have created an interactive website much like this one to invite those interested in leadership, networks, and evaluation to share resources, case studies, and engage in discussion. If you are interested in the paper you may download a copy at the website. http://link-to-results.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=48&Itemid=55

Submitted by Denis Jobin on Mon, 06/29/2009 - 14:06:

(..)unlike other organizations the goals of the member organizations often play an extremely important role in the functioning of the networks. How ought this influence be taken into account when assessing the utility or performance of a network?

First, it is important to define network; partnerships could also be considered as networks.

Of course other organizations, member organizations, do also have objectives and the objective based approach to evaluation is quite limited in measuring the influence of other rational within a network.

I would stress out the importance of objectives pursue by Individuals within the organization. Objectives of individual are often misaligned with those of a given network... or organization.

I mentioned before the usefulness of transaction costs as concept in dealing with assessing performance. The idea is simple, the more misaligned the objectives of individuals (or other constituents) with the objectives of the network, the higher the transaction costs. And this is well documented and easy to link, the higher the transaction costs, the lower the performance of a given governance structure.

Also, because network do not have clear organizational boundaries, they are suitable for transaction cost analysis. More precisely using a theory based framework, such as Agency theory.

Denis



Conclusion:

This was the 3rd topic of our website. This discussion topic and all previous ones have been kept open on our website, so that you can continue contributing to them. Do not hesitate to invite your friends and colleagues to participate to the discussions.

You can also participate to our 4th discussion topic, which will be online from Monday July 6 to Friday September 25: *What is the importance of leadership when assessing organizations?*