

Innovation and Progress: The Role of Networks

Consensus Statement of the Fourth Networks Leadership Summit (NLS IV) Banff, Canada, January 14, 2009

Since 2003, international groups of leading network researchers and managers have come together in a series of meetings to share experience and increase understanding of the nature, value and effective use of networks. This statement summarizes the consensus reached at the 2009 Banff Summit on the value of stimulating and supporting networks for achieving societal goals.

Collaborative networks have been chosen by governments and businesses around the world to deal with many of the most complex problems in uncertain environments like health and wellness, social services, global warming, disaster response, and terrorism. Canada is viewed as a world leader in using networks of organizations to integrate services, create and transfer knowledge, and build community capacity.

Networks have been established in the public and nonprofit sectors to create collective solutions to complex problems through cross-boundary action, whether those boundaries are jurisdictional, organizational, programmatic, geographic, professional, or sectoral. Those looking to maximize results on complex social issues will find investment in networks to be particularly useful in a comprehensive strategy, as networks have been demonstrated to facilitate progress by:

- Leveraging scarce resources and achieving economies;
- Strengthening integration, collaboration and coordination across and within programs, funders, organizations and sectors, while maintaining the benefits of diversity;
- Leveraging change by increasing shared learning, creativity, and innovation among individuals and organizations;
- Addressing needs in a more comprehensive way and improving responsiveness by enhancing the flow of information; and
- Empowering communities to respond to change and problems with greater capacity and resilience.

Networks are collaborative structures that rely on trust and reciprocity for exchange and accountability, rather than price systems (markets) or chain of command (hierarchies). Networks create new patterns of relationships that go beyond members' primary affiliations and are thus effective mechanisms to integrate otherwise isolated capacities for a common purpose. They establish the infrastructure of processes, information, people, and relationships needed to create synergies across multiple organizations, and across wide geographic areas.

Different types of networks are available for different strategy aims. Networks may be designed to improve service delivery, knowledge exchange, research collaboration, or community capacity. They may use a variety of different types of connections, such as knowledge or resource sharing, client referrals, or informal exchange. They may be emergent or mandated. However, effective networks which remain flexible and vibrant all require committed resources and appropriate competencies for network action, communication, leadership, management, participation, and evaluation.

Continued improvement in the health and wellbeing of Canadians, especially in tough economic times, will demand networks that create working connections across silos and stand alone organizations. Canadian public and nonprofit sector networks built up over the last decade have established an essential infrastructure for collaborative action, providing efficient, adaptable approaches to complex issues in rapidly changing environments.

In times of resource constraint, existing and new networks can be effective tools for achieving sustainable change, providing a platform from which innovative responses to changing challenges emerge.

The Networks Leadership Summit Series

The fourth in a series of invitational conversations on networks, NLS IV was designed to explore and broaden our understanding of networks with the intent of making them more effective. This Summit built on previous conversations to talk about sustaining networks in times of change and using networks to navigate successfully and take advantage of opportunities presented by a changing environment.

Dates and Places

Canmore 2003: Networks Workshop; NLS I (Halifax 2004); NLS II (Toronto 2005); NLS III (Banff 2007); NLS IV (Banff 2009).

Reports

- Networks and their Role in Enhancing Research Impact in Alberta, On Management Ltd., Birdsell, J. & Matthias, S.
- NLS I and II, http://www.chsrf.ca/knowledge_transfer/pdf/Bridging_boundaries_creating_knowledge_final_e.pdf
- NLS III, Using Networks to Enable Change: Developing, Sustaining and Evaluating Networks

Partners in NLS IV

Summit IV was sponsored by: *the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research (Research Transfer Network of Alberta); Alberta Health Services - Calgary Health Region; the Centre for Health and Policy Studies (University of Calgary), the Child and Youth Health Networks of Canada, Department of Social Work (University of Calgary), National Collaborating Centre for Methods and Tools, Population Health Intervention Research Centre (Canadian Institutes of Health Research), SEARCH Canada, and the Southern Alberta Child and Youth Health Network.*

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Key References

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- *Healthcare Papers*, Vol 7, No 2, 2006 Using Networks to Enhance Care