

## The Community Network Solution by Karen Stephenson

Forthcoming in **strategy+business** issue 49, Winter 2007

# The Community Network Solution

In reweaving the social fabric of a city or town, relationships trump rank.

by Karen Stephenson

**B**usiness leaders are increasingly aware that the health of their enterprise is intimately connected with the health of the communities where they operate. As employers, they sometimes find themselves drawn in to help solve local problems. But they are also often frustrated by those efforts, and no wonder. When a community sets out to address complex problems, such as economic stagnation, sprawl, and failing schools, the effort usually ends up going nowhere. Competing agendas surface, members delegate responsibilities to staff, difficult decisions get postponed. Hopes fade and interest flags as the hidden challenges and underlying conflicts become apparent.

The quiet failure of such initiatives is often attributed to human nature, or to some flaw in the process that shaped the effort. But in fact, the problem usually starts when the project organizers compose their first list of proposed participants. The organizers ask themselves: Who are the power brokers around town? Who are the key players? Who from business, gov-

ernment, education, and nonprofits should be involved?

Once the list is compiled, the usual suspects are convened. They assemble with enthusiasm, write a vision statement, sign up for committees, and pledge support. A press release goes out: “Local Leadership Team Sets to Work!”

And already, from the standpoint of anyone who has studied networks, the initiative is in trouble. Most likely, the organizers took care to involve people who hold high positions in the community. Their list may be lifted directly from a newspaper or magazine feature purporting to name the local “Power 100.” Thereafter, the whole effort will operate on the unspoken presumption that influence derives primarily from positional power, and that positional power translates into the ability to get things done.

That assumption is as naive as the belief that a company’s organization chart — with its boxes and circles, its dotted lines showing who reports to whom — provides an accurate picture of how the organization actually works. Like org charts, “most powerful” lists reveal nothing about the human qualities



of those who occupy senior positions, the web of personal relationships upon which they can draw, or the trust they inspire (or don't inspire) in other people.

Yet relationships built on trust are essential if complex initiatives that rely on voluntary efforts are to succeed. People simply will not put themselves on the line for a sustained period of time unless they trust and feel connected with the leaders of the initiative. Moreover, trust and positional power are often inversely correlated: The higher someone's position, the less likely it is that others trust that person. An ambitious local undertaking is practically guaranteed to fizzle if it relies on people whose chief qualification is a high place in the pecking order. Whenever change is on the agenda, the power of relationships trumps the power of position.

Therefore, the most effective local initiatives engage people whose informal networks reach broadly

finance executive who hosts community meetings in his or her company's conference room. The titles these individuals hold rarely reflect the contributions they have made or their ability to shape local conditions and influence the course of events.

### Cultural Topography

Identifying such people is a challenge because they fly below the public radar. Finding them requires not compiling a list but devising a new approach — making a map. This kind of map is a diagram of the informal communications links among people; it reveals the topography of the cultural territory by tracing the webs of relationships through which information is dispersed and resources flow. Because the map shows networks rather than hierarchical standing, it is innately more community-enabling than a list, which automatically orders people into rankings or disconnected

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Also contributing to this article was *s+b* Contributing Editor Sally Helgesen. The author wishes to thank Jeremy Hawkins, Peter Murphy, Geoff Mulgan, and Malcolm Gladwell.

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and deeply across sectors and organizations. Such people are often unsung heroes in a community. They might include a uniformed policewoman who sets up a system to link diverse services for victims of domestic violence, an assistant principal who runs a small but innovative program for local gang members, a bakery owner who designs training for immigrant employees in partnership with the local community college, or a

categories. The map shows both points of leverage (people who can be tapped for their interest and influence) and points of constraint (people who might have reason to shut down or limit an initiative). It identifies the personal connections that can be harnessed in the service of large-scale change.

For the past decade, I have been helping local communities create such maps. My first efforts were based in the United Kingdom, for a

project sponsored by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and later by the Young Foundation, a social innovation-oriented foundation based in London. Beginning in the early 2000s, we set up 13 pilot programs in four U.K. regions, each based in a local township, county, or district, including Devon in the southwest, Nottinghamshire in the east, and the Newham borough in London. Each project was intended to address community-related aspirations such as reducing burglary levels or domestic violence, dealing with antisocial behavior, improving neighborhoods, or building better youth services. There were already as many as 40 public-private partnerships, involving hundreds of organizations and thousands of people, all working on these problems, but with no coordination. Our assignment: to identify the kinds of links that could help accelerate the flow of information, to reduce redundancies, and to help the groups achieve more substantive success.

In 2005, I applied the same approach with a community affairs group called Leadership Philadelphia ([www.leadershipphiladelphia.org](http://www.leadershipphiladelphia.org)). The organization's ambitious goal was to bring a group of citizens together to develop a plan for the urban landscape, provide opportunities for the disenfranchised, increase neighborhood renewal, and enhance civic leadership. At that time Philadelphia was a demoralized city: Conflict between government and business, and between business and academia, had helped shape a 40-year-long slide into economic lethargy and political corruption. With few exceptions, local leaders had a poor record of cooperation and trust; they either ignored or actively undermined one another.

This sense of fragmentation and malaise was particularly disturbing to me when I walked in and around the majestic buildings of the “city of brotherly love,” where representatives of the original 13 colonies had once gathered to draft the U.S. Constitution. Benjamin Franklin had exhorted the Founding Fathers to “unite or die” here. Collaboration was Philadelphia's heritage, its gift to the nation. But now its civic leaders couldn't even agree on how to tackle its major problems.

Both in the United Kingdom and in Philadelphia, the civic leaders

therefore, was to identify those in the community who had the capacity to collaborate in a fruitful way. This is where my work came in. In years of working with corporations, government agencies, education institutions, and the military, I have developed a reliable and replicable system for helping people understand and improve the quality of their professional and social networks. We often start by identifying “connectors”: individuals who have inspired enough trust to build lasting, meaningful relationships across a broad range of economic sectors

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who brought me in understood from the start that this initiative would require businesses, government representatives, nonprofit organizations, and education institutions to put aside competing agendas. Indeed, that's what attracted them. But it was a tall order. There were many subtle obstacles. For example, many of these organizations and agencies were awash in data and metrics. Some of them used as many as 400 measures to support their claims of success. They tended to count processes rather than outcomes; for example, a mental health counseling agency might track the number of people visited rather than any changes in behavior. This made verifiable assessment and accountability difficult and fostered ever-higher levels of mutual suspicion.

The first step toward renewal,

and organizations. Connectors don't always hold high positions, but they wield significant power because they provide the adhesive that binds people together and makes things happen. They are the essential catalysts for change.

### Triads of Trust

Our method for identifying connectors has two stages. In Stage One, we conducted a modified “snowball sample” survey (in which respondents suggest other people to interview). In Philadelphia, this involved requesting nominations from Leadership Philadelphia members and former members, and putting out a call through local media. We prompted nominations with questions that included:

- Who do you consider highly innovative?
- Who brings ideas about the

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“big picture” to his or her efforts?

- Who has the integrity, concern for the common good, and guts needed to get this project done?

- Who would roll up his or her sleeves in order to see this project through to the very end?

- Who would you depend on to help bring together local resources?

We received 4,800 responses, which netted 4,300 nominations. We sorted, cross-filed, and indexed the answers to these surveys, and identified the people most frequently nominated by others as trustworthy. (Nominating oneself didn't count.) These were our connectors. In Philadelphia, there were 101 such people: 46 percent working in the nonprofit sector, 33 percent in business, 15 percent in government, and only 6 percent in academia. Two-thirds of the nominees were over age 40; 58 percent were male, 42 percent female. Sixty-nine percent had graduate degrees, 26 percent only undergraduate degrees, and 5 percent had no degrees. And although more than 68 percent of the group had grown up somewhere else, these non-native connectors had lived in Philadelphia, on average, for 24 years.

Stage Two represented an effort to understand why connectors had become connectors. In Philadelphia, for instance, we interviewed 80 out of the 101 people. We asked them to describe their life stories, identify their mentors, and tell us whether they saw themselves as connectors, and if so, why. We asked them to think about the other people in their network who seemed to “know everyone,” and to describe what all those connectors had in common. We asked them to rate themselves on a scale that ranged from pessimistic to optimistic, and

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to indicate how comfortable they were at starting new friendships. And we asked them to describe a local civic initiative in which they had participated that required that they connect across sectors.

Finally, we asked them to respond to a very different kind of survey — one designed so the responses could be easily analyzed by map-generating software. We showed participants a list of the other connectors and asked them to put a check next to the name of:

- Everyone they considered to be a part of their local community.
- Everyone they believed had the expertise to put ideas into action.
- Everyone with whom they would like to work.

With these answers, we were able to map correspondences that showed potential as well as actual paths for collaboration.

### Connecting the Connectors

There's no question that connectors have the potential to change their community landscape. They have the collaborative skills to get resources flowing. Their connections across sectors can inspire a wide level of trust. But we have learned how much more powerful they can be when connected in a deliberate fashion.

In Philadelphia, for example, we examined four economic sectors: nonprofit, private, government, and academic. We also recorded the genders and ethnic backgrounds of the people we interviewed. The nature of the connections varied depending on the questions. For example, when people identified others with “expertise,” we found strong male-to-female links among different types of businesses (real estate, law, and financial services among

them) and very strong links between business- and nonprofit-sector executives. But the links among those two groups and government agencies (whether local or state) were very weak, and academia came up last. Ironically, the “expert” status enjoyed by many government and academic leaders may undermine their ability to exchange knowledge with others.

Our interviews revealed other significant findings. We noted that connectors had been drawn to the community by their desire to make a difference. Not surprisingly, we also found that connectors were nonconformists. Finally, despite the small number of connectors in aca-

high-trust connections among particular groups of three or more organizations. These groups did not share ownership or governance structures — sometimes public agencies, private companies, and nonprofit organizations were in the same heterarchy — but the people involved all felt they needed each other to get things done. Thus, instead of staying within the boundaries of their workplace hierarchies, these highly connected people kept closely in touch with one another and collaborated regularly. I soon came to realize that, in the increasingly small, flat world in which we live, these heterarchies are fast becoming the rule, not the exception.

## The ability to succeed is contagious; if success is rooted in connection, it can spread virally across communities.

demia and the lack of connections among university people, the connectors told us that they had gotten their start as informal leaders through people they met within the university crucible.

Once we had our map of connectors, we began to work with local groups to shine a light on these individuals and to connect them with one another. We did this by developing a mentorship program, a set of workshops on leadership, and a competency profile for civic leaders. And we developed a new high school leadership curriculum to identify and coach the next generation of connectors.

Both in the U.K. pilots and in Philadelphia, we found a recurring pattern I came to call “heterarchies”:

After studying the complex webs on both sides of the Atlantic, I reached a conclusion that seems to hold true in other communities as well: Networks of trust in heterarchical structures are the key to collaborative success. By contrast, when agencies and sectors retreat to their organizational silos and do not work together, local inertia tends to take hold. The maps we created provided a very different impression from the statements we heard from local managers and political leaders about how things got done. Mid-level to junior-level staff in the government bodies of British townships, for instance, often played the decisive role in enabling agencies to cooperate, but their efforts went largely unnoticed and found little

official support or respect. Such people were hidden resources waiting to be recognized and more formally unleashed.

I'll never forget the meeting we held with a local community group in Philadelphia that had lobbied us to let it view and publicize the results of our search for connectors. When members of the group finally saw the precious list of key connectors, their disappointment was palpable. "Who are these people?" they protested. "And why do you think they're important?" As it turned out, there was only a 1 percent overlap between our connectors and a local magazine's list of "Philadelphia's 100 Most Powerful People."

Of course, many of those on the most-powerful list had had the good sense to hire these connectors in their organizations. But maps of connections defy conventional wisdom everywhere — in communities and organizations alike — precisely because they depict people's ability to informally collaborate across levels, sectors, and organizations. I have come to think that the desire to have conventionally powerful people — the usual suspects of the top 100 list — at the head of an initiative is nearly universal, and based on a commonplace, irrational fallacy. High-profile individuals are assumed to be powerful; they are seen as special carriers of the mysterious, innate qualities that will ensure the success of any venture. These are our magic people: If we bring them on board, great things will happen.

### The Beauty of Heterarchy

In the social sciences, this assumption is known as the theory of contagion; it was first and powerfully enunciated in James George Frazer's

classic study of ancient ritual, *The Golden Bough*. Frazer hypothesized that rituals that appeared to work in specific circumstances (the dance that seemed to bring rain, the rain-maker that seemed to bring money, the sacrifice credited with turning a plague aside) were picked up by neighboring tribes and disseminated across great distances by word of mouth and anecdote until they achieved the status of myth. Such rituals in effect made up the best practices of preindustrial humanity.

Yes, the ability to succeed *is* contagious; if success is rooted in connection, it can spread virally across organizations and communities. But people with high positions are not the connectors who transmit these capabilities to others. As social network researchers know, there are three basic network roles, all discernible in mathematical analysis of systems like the U.K. regions or Philadelphia: hubs, gatekeepers, and pulsetakers. Hubs are the people who know the most people. They facilitate expansion of the network, trading (for example, the exchange of favors), and the rapid dissemination of information. Gatekeepers occupy a critical path. They are often the only bridge between an important part of the network and everyone else. They make a network stronger, in part by helping people focus and move things along. Pulse-takers are called on by other significant connectors, often for their judgment or insight, and they help the group maintain its integrity and perspective. They are invaluable in times of turmoil. (For more about these roles, see "Karen Stephenson's Quantum Theory of Trust," by Art Kleiner, *s+b*, Fourth Quarter 2002.)

Since the surveys can be used to identify people as hubs, gatekeep-

ers, or pulsetakers (on the basis of who else mentioned them and in what context), their roles can be enhanced by deliberately putting these strategically connected and trustworthy people more consistently in touch with one another. We did exactly that in the U.K. to build bridges among community leaders and councils, and in Philadelphia to span socioeconomic barriers. A map of connectors, unlike a formal organization chart, shows the collaborative subtext that makes inter-agency cooperation successful.

And we did one other thing: We deliberately fostered more heterarchies. The beauty of a heterarchy is the way in which it enables people with diverse skills, knowledge, and working styles to operate without favoring one organization or culture over another. As a network that both requires and generates trust, a heterarchy operates like an invisible human utility. It puts forth a force of enormous power that, like electricity, can't be observed with the naked eye.

Until we build better networks in our communities, lack of trust will corrode the democratic process. Conventional leaders can't move us out of this situation. Community connector projects offer a modest template for returning to the collaborative methods that were the best practices of long ago, those that made the United Kingdom and the United States exemplars of democratic principles in action. +

Reprint No. 07403

strategy+business magazine  
is published by Booz Allen Hamilton.  
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