

System Weaving During Crisis

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Abstract

Strategies for responding to different kinds of crisis were explored by highly experienced network designers and facilitators (or “netweavers”) during a dialogue series on how to maintain lively and generative innovation communities held from 2018 to 2020. During these discussions, netweavers wrestled with the need to enhance the resilience of their organizations to stress while not inhibiting the opportunities for a more fundamental change that a crisis can bring. In their own words, I provide what participants shared about how to give their members opportunities to connect and support one another, reflect on changing opportunities, and rapidly pivot toward time-sensitive opportunities after the COVID-19 outbreak. I also offer their reflections on the Black Lives Matter protests of the summer of 2020 about the impact of systemic racism within their organizations and efforts to identify and act on changes within their grasp. In both cases, the netweavers stressed that active and latent capacities they had cultivated in prior years had proven essential for a rapid and effective response to shock and stress.

Keywords: netweavers, generative innovations, resilience, COVID-19, Black Lives Matter

Introduction

Responding to the multiple crises of 2020 required all the leadership strategies and organizational capacities that were documented in the other articles in this Social Innovations Journal series on managing social innovation organizations during disruptive times, including:

- Cultivate love and an appreciation for difference within an organizational culture of safety;
- Enable people to be open to question their ideas and assumptions;
- Appreciate the whole person and cultivate a mind/body connection through playful facilitation;
- Support “virtuous cycles” where network members “pay it forward” without expecting an immediate return;
- Have a plan of action, but hold it lightly;
- Monitor the “state of flow” of their networks, and;
- Nurture a “core story” within their networks to support people’s ability to tell a story suited to their place and circumstance.

It is critical to first note that the two principal crises of 2020 that the designers and facilitators of learning networks – or “netweavers” - engage with below (the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matters protests in response to the murder of George Floyd) were not crises

in the same sense, and the netweavers did not respond to them with the same approach. To understand the difference in the way the netweavers responded to these two crises is to engage with the difference between shock and stress. The netweavers responded to the pandemic as a shock – a disruption to the social order – while they interpreted the Black Lives Matter protests as a symptom of a deeper stress associated with systemic racism, and as a challenge to dominant societal beliefs and practicesⁱ. What can be an appropriate response to a shock may be the wrong response to stress because strengthening and reinforcing a system that is experiencing ongoing stress can inhibit prospects for a more fundamental socio-technical transition (Smith and Stirling 2010)ⁱⁱ.

Considered together, the netweavers response to these two different kinds of crisis highlighted their commitment to maintaining the resilience of their networks. The term resilience has many meanings - in this case it means navigating the complexity of crises to enhance people's ability to respond rapidly and recover, explore and enable new possibilities, and act to transform the system into something new (Folke 2006; Kinzig et al 2006). Resilience is about managing both shock and stress, enabling desired change while simultaneously maintaining desired functions of the existing system (Walker 2006).

Methods

The insights presented in this article series here were principally derived from two online dialogues that I convened on Zoom on August 19, 2019, and June 1, 2020. In each of these 90-minute dialogues highly experienced netweavers discussed the challenges of building and maintaining change-making networks.

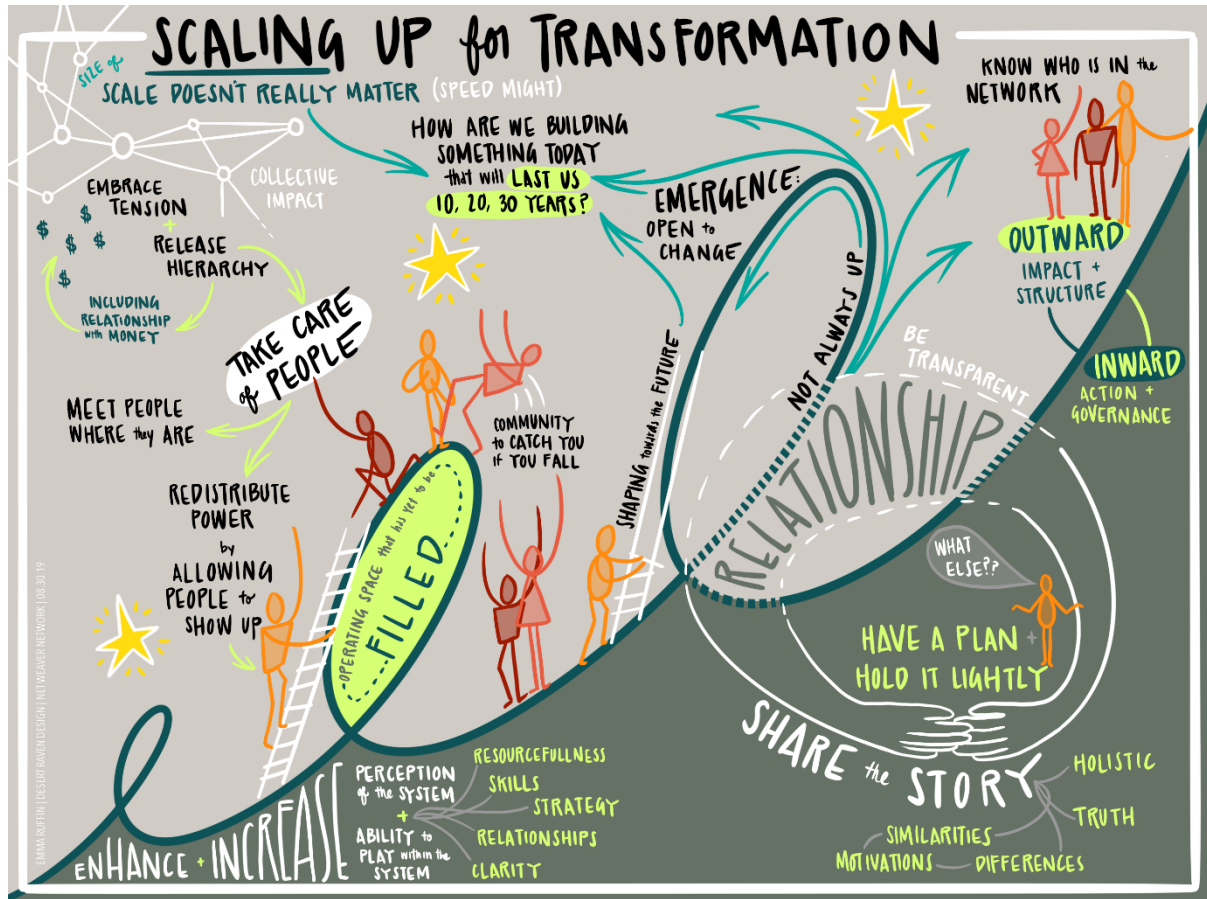
The first of these dialogues focused on how to scale innovation to achieve social and ecological change. Participating netweavers and their organizations were:

- [Sarah Ann Shanahan: Director of Community Management, The RE-AMP Network](#)
- [Michelle Medley-Daniel: Director of the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network](#)

The core questions I asked the netweavers during this dialogue were:

- What does scaling up for systems change mean for you and your network?
- How do you design a network to enable scaling up?
- What are some of the more effective things you can do as a netweaver to facilitate scaling up?
- What conditions need to be in place to enable scaling up to achieve systems change to occur?

Below is the visual record of this dialogue:



Created by [Emma Ruffin](#)

The second dialogue focused on how netweavers were faring during the Covid-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd. Participating networks and their organizations were:

- [Gail Francis](#): Strategic Director, and [Sarah Ann Shanahan](#): Director of Community Management at The RE-AMP Network
- [Michelle Medley-Daniel](#): Director of the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network
- [Curtis Ogden](#): Organizing team of Food Solutions New England

The core questions I asked the netweavers during this dialogue were:

- What features of your networks are turning out to be critical, for both holding the network together and continuing to make progress?
- What are you doing differently, and why?
- Are these crises opportunities, and why?

We did not prepare a visual record of this dialogue.

In addition, some of the insights presented in this article were derived from the other seven dialogues convened between 2018-2000 to explore how to maintain lively, generative networks, which are described in Goldstein (2021).

Participants in each dialogue were sent follow-up questions to stimulate additional ideas and reflection. The dialogues were recorded and transcribed, and the transcription and responses to follow-up questions were coded and analyzed using [Delve](#) content analysis software. Analysis of individual cases was guided by grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2015) with an emphasis on identifying emergent themes and insights (Law, 2004). This article contains the principal ideas from this analysis, along with direct quotations from the participating netweavers, which were edited to enhance their clarity and enable them to stand alone in this format. These edits were limited to changing tense or pronoun and removing elements characteristic of verbal speech (e.g., phrases like “um” and “well”).

After a shock, provide support, engage your members deeply, and support collective action

People rely on existing connections and communications infrastructure to coordinate during a crisis

All your prior work to build strong relationships can really payoff:

- “One of our members said after an online workshop, “That went well because of all of the decisions we have been making for the past six years.” She recognized how the relationship building, focusing, and creating both the systems and the connections and setting up expectations for being human, made it possible for us to have a great virtual experience together.”

Communications systems that were already developed now proved essential:

- “The fact that this network exists and has some infrastructure has been valuable to our members at this point in time. We can quickly get an invitation out to people to come together and hold a conversation and they have enough context of who each other is that they can follow up separately. There's been a ton of stuff like that which people followed up on and then just sent us an email a couple weeks later, “Hey, just so you know, the Governor just signed this thing that we talked about.”
- “We definitely were ahead of the game in terms of already having those systems set up, and then people just turned to them.”

There was even a sense that communications infrastructure that some thought to be redundant or unnecessary now proved highly useful to them:

- “There's been more participation and willingness to explore using approaches that we had some earlier resistance.”

- “Forced adoption of remote technology solutions to figure out how to work together helped push people over the edge who'd been like, “I would rather not do that, I just want to talk individually to people”.”

Your organization can be a source of immediate emotional support

- “At the very beginning when we realized there was a pandemic, there was this real inward turning that happened for a lot of people, an emergency response approach around family. The thing that made me feel good about the relationships we built is that this response quickly expanded within our group. If you think about that as a bull's eye of people that you go to lean on or get support from, our network was pretty close to a lot of members' center.”
- “Our members have built good relationships between other network members; I see them doubling down on that during this pandemic. It's a recognition that we're all trying to figure this out, we're all suffering to some degree, and we've offered different levels of spaces for people to connect to find some of this joy and happiness and support.”

You should support your people by enabling them to honestly be present in whatever condition they really are in

We need to slow down to go fast:

- “While we feel a deep sense of urgency in these moments of crisis, taking time to build relationships and to give care to one another is really about slowing down to go fast. There's tension because there's so much urgency in the world around us. We need to do things, we need new strategies, we need to act. But we can't forget about taking time to care for one another, to give space for relationship building.”

The priority is to care for people by giving them permission to be present in whatever way works for them, which includes being able to not show up and leave our meetings at any time:

- “We started saying invitations instead of expectations.”
- “We give people permission and space for self-care. If I am doing an orientation I say, “Hey, I do have slides, but if you don't want to look at them right now, because you need to take a walk while I'm talking, you should do that.”
- “We give people permission for good distractions. So, if you need to walk around, if you want to stretch, if you want to color, that's totally fine.”
- “We're creating more flexibility, more space for people to show up in different ways.”
- “We had people just laying on the floor because they were so done. And we say that if you need to go lay on the floor at some point today, do it. We get it. We still are glad to have you here.”

Be very explicit about this change in expectations, since people are still trying to abide by previous organizational norms:

- “Before, we tried to build a lot of trust around having people hold each other to certain kinds of expectations around their participation together. Now we are telling everyone that we've realized that some of you can't show up in the same way- that they made those commitments under a different set of circumstances.”
- “If something came up and they didn't join the call that I had scheduled with them, they're immediately writing to me, "Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry about this." And I've been good about saying, "Hey, you don't need to apologize. It's totally okay. I understand life is crazy. We'll just find another time to reschedule. I'm glad you're taking care of what you need to take care of." Just saying those things, I feel like they have a sigh of relief. "Okay, yeah, it's okay for me to do that, I get permission to do these things”.”
- “Verbalizing all of that has been helpful to people, because they feel more willing to tell us that that's their reality and not feel like “I need to not tell these people what's really going on”.”

Try some playful techniques to enable people to show up in different ways and be open to how they feel:

- “Ritual and play are becoming even more important. We need this joy, naming and honoring feelings using official and unofficial protocols.”
- “I got off a staff call this morning where we literally did shaking, you know, shaking as a way to move things through, which I feel like I need every day and as I check in with others. Many don't even realize they have that need until you name it. Especially now that we're held so captive to this two-dimensional world of images, which is so profoundly dissatisfying.”
- “Some of us are better able to guard or more socialized to guard or feel like it's not legitimate or that we're going to be harmed or further oppressed for creating spaces where it's just much more human.”

You can provide your members guidance without being overly directive by inviting them to engage in deeper reflection

Deeper reflection can enable your members to come up with ideas that are both compatible with your organizational goals and suited to their specific circumstances, as well as enhance their understanding of the relationship between their work and the collective possibilities for systems change. Rather than being directive and prescriptive, invite people to reflect on your organization's underlying assumptions and beliefs – what Argyris (1976) called “second-loop learning”:

- “We've tried to think about ways we could help people, while also recognizing that everybody's dealing with so many different things, so there's not a way to be like, "Here's what you need to do”.”

- “It's not our role to tell people what to do. So instead, we thought that what's most helpful is to try to make more visible the thought and decision-making processes that we see going on and to share those questions with people, to spark their own thinking and to unearth and mine down into what's the calculus behind that. What's the decision matrix? What are the pieces that we're putting together to have this conversation?”
- “People are in very different places. So rather than being like, "Here's how you can do that safely", we're like, "Here's what we're thinking about as we try to think about doing that. And here's the information we're trying to gather. And here's the kinds of questions we're asking ourselves”.”
- “In the past we might have said, "Here's the safety protocol." It's been a good step back to question the assumptions we're making about why we should adopt one another's procedures and say, "We don't know what you should do, but here's the framework we're building around figuring out what to do”.”

The goal is not to direct people or drive them toward a common strategy, but to enhance their capacity to engage deeply with one another:

- “At the end of almost every conversation people say, "This is always the place that can pull me out of my day-to-day overwhelmed feeling and make me feel connected to a larger vision and strategy. It connects me to people that make me think about things differently”.”
- “It's become a joke that there's a ‘network headache’ - whenever they go onto a network call it makes them think so much that they come away with a big headache. But they say, "It's a good headache!”.”

These capacities enable members of the organization to be more effective in the moment - they will have the confidence to act without explicit direction in ways that are aligned with your group's goals:

- “Our members want to step up and lead things more. In a couple instances, I've just asked if they would be willing to and it's immediately like, "Oh, my gosh, yes. Thank you so much for asking. I'd love to do that”.”
- “I've seen more members step up and take leadership. There's been more initiative from our members to launch their own things and just tell us what they need to help them do it.”

Be open to fleeting opportunities to pursue change during a crisis, without being overly prescriptive

Once the members had gotten over the initial disruption and shock, transition them into exploring new opportunities:

- “We've gone from an immediate response where we just wanted to reach out and make connection with members and figure out some immediate things we could do to try to bolster everybody's ability to continue to engage, to then moving into this

conversation about, “Well, what is next? What can we do together? What are your opportunities locally? How can we support those and try to imagine what might be possible? What do we think is going on and where might we go? What can we do to make sense and to take action that we think might be meaningful or do something that we think could set us up for a better future?”.”

- “The role and the duty that we have is to try to figure out how to make some sense of things and figure out what can be.”

Do this with humility, acknowledging the losses as well as the opportunities and exploring what to keep as well as what to let go:

- “It's not helpful to start from a place of, “Well, that all burned to the ground, so great.” There may be some helpful rearrangements that can make different things possible. It's more of an obligation than an opportunity.”
- “What is our work right now? We want to walk through a portal to something else, but not before attending to the emergency, working for stabilization and some form of recovery that doesn't take us back to what was so toxic.”
- “Where do we need to spend effort, emergency stabilization, recovery or pushing for the future? How do we distribute our efforts and how do we ensure that it's informed by our values? There's no right answer, it's just a way of engaging in some reflection.”
- “There's clearly some things that we need to let go of, not just what are we going to start. We're sunseting that, and then what are we exploring, or what do we need to mature? A combination of those things has been helpful, with the idea that this is experimental and we gotta keep seeing what we learn from this and learning, learning, learning as we go.”

Be nimble in pursuing opportunities while the system may be open to change:

- “This is a learning opportunity for us to re-understand reality.”
- “It's a time to be aware, alive and nimble. It's accelerating what we do, which is fast loop learning about our whole strategy to transform the system. That system is an artifact - it's not quite fossilized but it's quickly getting to be not real.”
- “We're trying to think about what opportunity there is for rebuilding and take the creative opportunity to think about what power structures might not be in play in the same ways they have been and where they might be swinging back even stronger, and trying to get in the window of opportunity before that happens.”

Be attentive to how your adversaries might see the crisis as an opportunity too:

- “Some of our opponents are going to see opportunities in this pandemic so we need to strategize about that. For example, one issue is single use plastic, that's something we were starting to focus on, to build knowledge and adopt practices for minimizing single plastic use. Now obviously this pandemic calls for us to start using some of those things again. That's an opportunity for people who are in the fossil fuel industry and other polluters.”

While pursuing these goals avoid being overly prescriptive – let things go where they will and let your organization guide itself:

“Especially as we're going virtual, even if I have a very structured agenda, I just kind of let things flow and give space where things are needed. The practice of having a plan and holding it lightly has been important during all this time. This has been true not only in terms of the work of the network or what my work plan was for this year, but also in how we engage one another by giving more intentionality for people to have space and to make connections.”

Virtual connection can be an opportunity not a constraint:

- “There's a lot of groups out there right now that are thinking, "We can't really do that right now because everything's virtual" but I've found that there are more opportunities to connect now than ever before.”

In response to systemic stress, be open to making fundamental changes

The first challenge is to accept that you may need to make fundamental changes to your organization

The Black Lives Matter movement protests after the murder of George Floyd was a more fundamental challenge than the pandemic, and as a group the netweavers were less prepared to address it:

- “How are we actually stepping into this moment right now? How are we meeting frontline groups that we want to be partnering with and that we need to be partnering with? How are we standing up and showing up for them right now in this moment of crisis? I don't feel like we're doing that.”

On reflection, the netweavers realized the inadequacy of their understanding of how to achieve their deepest goals. They realized that they need to broaden and re-frame their theory of change:

- “Part of what we have not done well is in trying to narrow the domain that we're bringing people together around, we've left out really important foundational work about how we're going to get any kind of community resilience.”
- “It feels like we are saying “That's your thing, that's your problem. And here's our problem over here. And when it serves us, we can make connections and do things together. But otherwise, you're going to deal with that and we're going to deal with this.” That just doesn't feel authentic. It doesn't feel genuine. It doesn't feel like we're living into the values of our network.”
- “We brought a lot of white privilege to our strategy design and our partnerships and the ways that we think the system works that are not acknowledging the experiences and the realities of different communities.”

Broaden inclusion to enhance understanding of how to bring about more fundamental change

The netweavers realized that including Black members in their networks wasn't enough – they needed to include the perspectives of their Black members in their theory of change:

- “We had been saying that our network is a great space for equity. But when I got down into the weeds with these folks, what I hear is horrible, “I show up and no one wants to hear about my experience as a Black person.” It's the exact same conversation where the person of color is saying, “I am not heard, I'm not valued and my experiences don't impact the agenda” and the white people are saying, “It's amazing. We're working hand in glove and the people of color are totally shaping the agenda and I can be my authentic self.” So whoa, we have so far to go.”
- “This requires us to step back and figure out how to do things differently. We're not going to get to the endpoint that we want. We thought we need to have representation. But it goes far beyond that. It's not just about bringing people into the strategy or narrative that we've created. It's about better understanding the complexity of the strategy we need, instead of the one we've created as a smaller privileged group.”
- “We need to think about how solidarity does or does not show up in our narrative and what it means to be in solidarity, as a white person or as a man.”

Their networks could support a deeper reflective understanding of the relationship between their organizational mission and social justice:

- “I see it as an appreciation for the complexity of the situation. What helps our members see themselves in Black Lives Matter as we get more deeper in our understanding is having that shared understanding of complexity. So even if Black Lives Matter doesn't feel exactly mission aligned, if you have a deeper understanding of complexity and the relationship between what that thing is that is an arm's reach away to what our actual mission is. If you can start to see and understand that people do open up, “Oh, that is connected, that is important.” It is related to our mission, even if it feels like it's a step out.””
- “It does open people up to see how they fit and how those issues are connected and important, even if they aren't exactly mission aligned.”

The fact that this reflection was taking place during the Covid-19 pandemic wasn't seen as problematic – actually, they suggested that the pandemic offered them an opportunity to operate at a more appropriate speed:

- “The slowing down is very much appreciated – it is necessary for healing.”

Once you accept that addressing systemic racism is a difficult task and a long-term goal, you can focus on supporting the loving relationships that are required to begin the work

The netweavers didn't claim to have all the answers and emphasized the need to feel their way through the complexity:

- “We recognize that we don't have the solutions and that we need to make space to have a different conversation.”
- “We are trying to be a place where our members can come together and be human. So many of us are just so sad and angry and have so many emotions around all of this. We're still trying to figure things out.”
- “How to reconcile racial justice and other elements of social justice is a question for leadership, in terms of how much you're going to ask people to try to make space for that.”
- “We're need to make sure we're not just replicating white supremacy approaches and systems in the issues that we're trying to work on. It's definitely something that our network needs to work on.”

While aware of their limitations, the netweavers were convinced that their networks had the loving capacity to support their members to do this hard work:

- “We name love as holding the full complexity of it all and still moving forward and upholding the voices and the visions of those who've been most marginalized - that's what we're trying to lead with.”
- “To really lean into love means feeling our full feelings and owning that complexity. I feel like there's so much work to be done, especially with white men at this time - they just lock it down. It's all intellectualizing, like "Oh my gosh, with the volatility if I feel my emotions now that's even more volatility. I can't possibly handle that." I'm like, "I am raging and about to burst into tears here. And I know you're in there somewhere, and that's key to your intelligence. So much of your intelligence is locked away.””

Conclusion

After the shock of the Covid-19 outbreak the netweavers sought to:

- Enable their membership to reflect on their related but not identical goals, which enhanced the motivation and agency for action;
- Enable members to fully use the organizational infrastructure they had spent years creating;
- Provide for member’s emotional needs by enabling them to be present in the network in whatever way worked for them, and;
- Orient members toward new opportunities and risks that emerge when existing power structures are weakened or change.

The netweavers addressed the challenge of the Black Lives Matter movement protests with humility and an awareness of their failures to consider the impact of systemic racism within their networks. They sought to provide a place for safety where their members could orient to the systemic challenge, question and change their own attitudes and behavior, deliberate about adaptive and transformative alternatives, and act in purposeful ways that could support a desirable transition. While they recognized that the challenge was deeply rooted and not

solvable within their domain of action, they committed to contributing to a larger social cascade by helping members of their networks affect changes that were within their grasp.

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ⁱ Both crises could be framed as either shock or stress since these terms can be interpreted differently depending on your frame of reference and values. For example, Covid-19 could be framed a symptom of the stress humanity is placing on the biosphere, although none of the networks operated within that frame of reference. Black Lives Matter could also be framed as a shock, and many conservative members of society did frame it that way – as social disorder and a challenge to public safety.

ⁱⁱ For example, consider the difference between drought as a shock and climate change as a stress. While developing genetically modified drought-tolerant crops may be a good way to maintain food production during a drought, it can also be counter-productive because it consolidates a commitment to the input-intensive agro-industrial economy that is in part responsible for climate change.