Jumpstart Virtuous Cycles Within Social Innovation Communities

Bruce Evan Goldstein[1]

[1]Associate Professor, Program in Environmental Design, University of Colorado Boulder

Corresponding author: Bruce Goldstein, brugo@colorado.edu

Abstract

Strong leadership is crucial to fostering social innovation, and yet successful social innovation organizations are often those in which leaders do not play a dominant role. This is made possible by leadership practices that activate a community's self-organizing and self-guiding potential. In this paper I share some of these effective practices, which were identified by highly experienced designers and facilitators of learning networks during a dialogue series on how to maintain lively, generative innovation communities held from 2018 to 2020. I provide advice from the netweavers in their own words, along with my commentary on how to create this potential by initiating and maintaining virtuous cycles of exchange and reciprocity, where group members could "pay it forward" without directly expecting something back every time. Many of these leadership practices are simple actions that are common sense practices in our personal lives but often absent in the workplace, such as creating a welcoming environment, assessing what people wanted to give and receive, being the first to give your members something valuable, calling attention to their successes, and underscoring the value that you provide them every time you interact. One powerful way to foster reciprocity that they emphasized was to organize semi-autonomous small-team activities, or co-work. While co-work can and should accomplish useful outcomes, its greatest value may be in how it maintains necessary coherence and coordination while contributing to building ownership and autonomy that supports an organization's capacity for self-governance.

Keywords: netweavers, social innovation, learning networks, virtuous cycles, self-governance

Introduction

There is a paradox at the heart of leadership for social innovation. Strong leadership is a crucial feature of innovative organizations, and yet the most innovative organizations rely least on their leadership. The way to resolve this apparent contradiction is by emphasizing leadership practices that activate self-organizing and self-guiding potential. As described in this paper, these practices include creating a welcoming environment, assessing what members could provide as well as what they needed, visibly providing gifts without an expectation of return, and calling attention to member's successes.

These practices create and sustain *virtuous cycles,* create favorable results that reinforce themselves through a positive feedback loop, as each iteration of the cycle generates an increase in a beneficial quality, feature, or trait in the next cycle. A classic case of this is Putnam's (2000)

research into how trust and reciprocity powered a positive feedback between social support and social capital in Northern Italy.

The network designers and facilitators – or "netweavers" – whose ideas are highlighted in this paper explored the tension between their desire to enhance the autonomy and creativity of their members and maintain necessary coherence and coordination within their networks. To balance this tension, they described their efforts to engage members of their organization in co-work in small teams, each with the freedom to define a common task in a way that suited their skills and circumstances. Co-work is challenging since members are distributed across teams and interact both synchronously and asynchronously. Team members need to take ownership of the process and support one-another, while maintaining the connection to the shared purposes of the organization (Hansen 2016). Netweavers noted that virtuous cycles can contribute ultimately to independence from their own leadership, as members take control over group decision-making processes and are empowered to carry out group decisions.

Methods

The insights presented here were principally derived from two online dialogues that I convened on Zoom on January 23, 2019 and June 20, 2019. 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 organize co-work within a network, aligning members in ways that enabling autonomy and creativity while maintaining coherence and coordination between sites and among members. Participating netweavers and their organizations were:

- Sarah Ann Shanahan: Director of Community Management for the RE-AMP Network
- Paul Nelson, Network Manager, 100 Resilient Cities Network
- Kevin Chang: Executive Director, Kuaʻāina Ulu ʻAuamo (KUA) Indigenous Peoples Networks
- Emily Bateson, Director of Network for Landscape Conservation: Center for Large Landscape Conservation

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

- What does co-work achieve?
- What are your "trade secrets" for managing co-Work and what have you learned in the way you've administered Co-Work?
- How do you assess whether co-work is effective?

Below is the visual record of this dialogue:
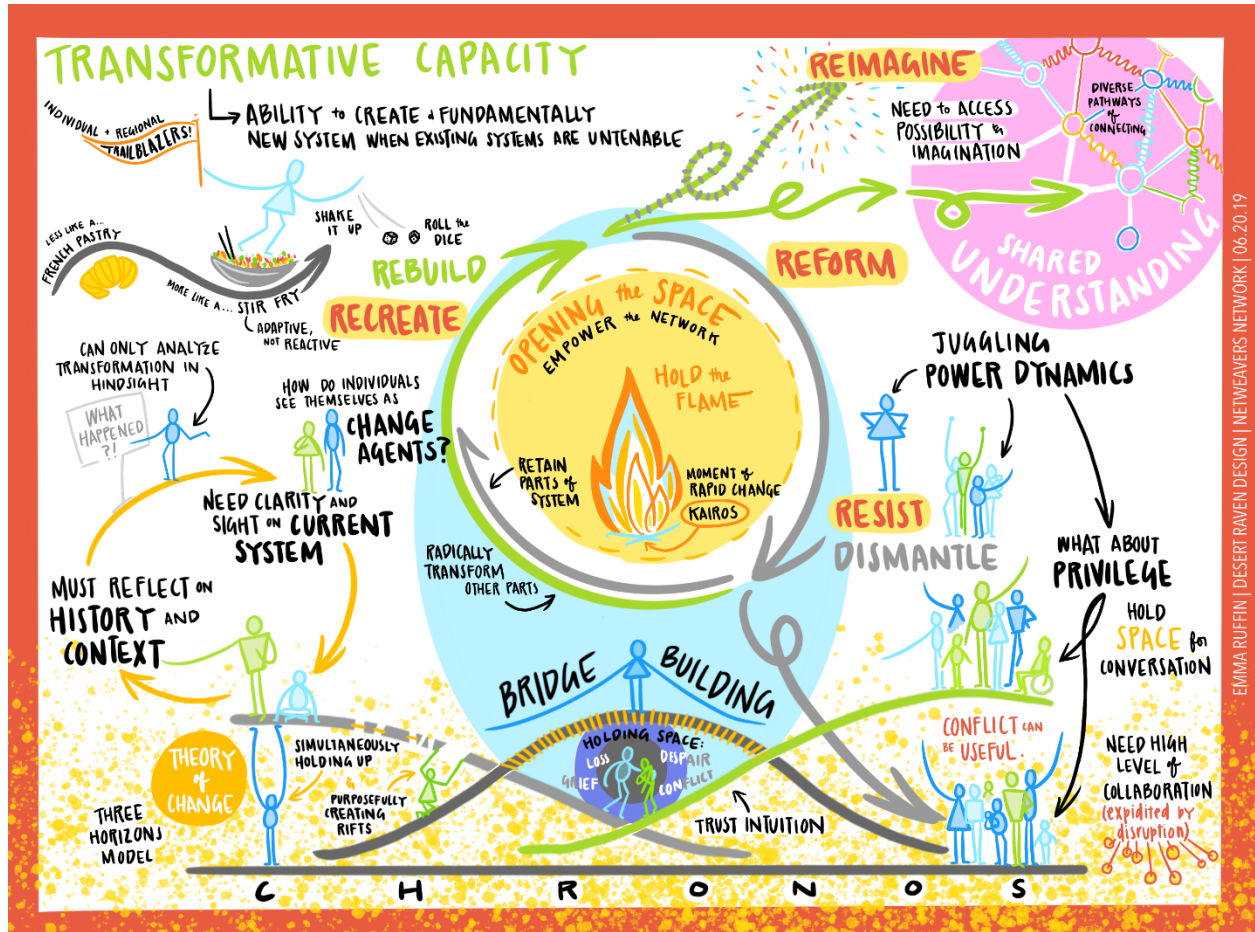

Graphic by Emma Ruffin

The second dialogue focused on how to create adaptive and transformative capacity for innovation within a network. Participating networks and their organizations were:

- Stuart Cowan: Founding Convener of the Regenerative Communities Network
- Gail Francis: Strategic Director of 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:

- Does your network create adaptive and transformative capacity, and how?
- What are some of the ways that you design, organize, or facilitate network learning to build capacity?
- Is there an agreement in your networks on what changes are required, or do your people have different notions of what capacity you need to develop?

Below is the visual record of this dialogue:

Graphic by Emma Ruffin

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).

After each dialogue, participants were sent a link to the visual record as well as some 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").

Create virtuous cycles in your community

A virtuous cycle is a feedback loop in which the desired patterns of behavior in each iteration of the cycle reinforces the next phase of the cycle through positive feedback:

- "A network only survives and thrives if you are finding benefit in it and you are giving benefit back to your colleagues."

Once established, a virtuous cycle becomes self-replicating, since it is woven into the culture of the community. The loop is self-perpetuating, as members "pay it forward" to new members, which isn't a strictly transactional relationship - if members feel that they are part of a "gift culture" they don't keep score and they develop a sense of collective ownership and having "skin in the game." As everyone both contributes and receives it strengthens ties and establishes trust, builds internal alliances, and reduces power imbalances:

- "They don't want to let us down and we don't want to let them down - I think that motivates people. It helps people stay engaged, helps them follow through on their commitments. That's a self-fulfilling prophecy, people start feeling like they're getting and giving and getting and giving. The system is working for them."

How to initiate a virtuous cycle

Management scholars (e.g., Edgeman et al. 2018) have pointed out the critical role of servant leadership in fostering a virtuous cycle of trust enhancing reciprocity, leading to more effective collaboration, which in turn reinforces trust. You can initiate a virtuous cycle of mutual giving and receiving by being the first to give:

- "One of the practices that we have in the network is offering a lot of things for free to our members. Our expectation is that you're going to give something back to the network after receiving this. So you didn't have to pay for that thousand-dollar training. In return, one day you're going to agree to give some service back to the network and help the network in some way."

Many things of value can be exchanged – including technical knowledge, resources, political support, and mentorship. You need to know what gifts to give – one way to learn is to engage your community in an initial participatory self-assessment to identify what they can give and want to receive:
- "One of the ways that we learned more about who was positioned to contribute is we underwent a deep assessment process. That gave us a better sense of where people had deep experience and what people wanted. That was a good grounding for all of us to start from."

Mutual support can be jumpstarted by celebrating initial successes that may occur outside of the community:

- "Another key role and practice of hosting is being a celebrant, to celebrate people in an outspoken way, appreciating people, letting no good deed go ignored, and making space for people to celebrate. We often do this in trainings and meetings - what's the good news, we want to know about your successes, and we want to celebrate them right here and now."

People need to know what they've received – it's up to you to clearly identify what you have provided to your members in exchange for their contributions of time, talent, and commitment, even if it's just a well-organized meeting:

- "At the end of every meeting, we identify a tangible accomplishment or product. Every time - we identify something they can use, something tangible, we didn't waste our time – we had accomplishments, not just a lot of talk. In this world it is a gift to accomplish something by going and not have your time wasted in another low productivity meeting."

Strengthen your virtuous cycles through co-work

Organizing co-work can enable your virtuous cycles to thrive while producing useful and tangible work products. Co-work is not ordinary teamwork – it's a creative activity that you initiate by providing resources and a set of general guidelines. It's up to members of your community to take it from there and define and develop the co-work in their own context.

Understanding the scales at which work operates among your members in your domain is key to selecting co-work opportunities. In each of the netweaver's networks, most of the work is at the local level, such as fire mitigation activities, ranching, and crop production. This creates many opportunities for co-work, since network members who do not share a place (a physical community) can function as learning peers in co-work rather than implementation partners:

- "You need to shift context to make different things possible. Sometimes that's a big, coordinated turnout action, and sometimes its many little things happening in different contexts that are connected and learning from one another."
- "Co-Work is about the practice of sharing around a common area, and then collectively coming together to advance a point of view."

Co-work enhances mutual recognition and support within your community by bringing people together to get to know one another by sharing ideas and techniques. By working together to achieve a doable, clear objective, people can feel connected and supported, despite working in isolation:

- "Co-work allows them to see that their commitment is matched by the commitment that others are making to the shared effort."

What you don't want is co-work that isn't tethered to a useful purpose, wasting people's time and undermining their willingness to participate. You need to keep in mind that co-work is also a way to build your organization's "collective muscle" – the strength of connection and joint capacity:

- "Our co-work is not outcome oriented but learning-oriented."

Co-work is often worth initiating even when there are more efficient ways to delegate tasks, when the results are not likely to be what you want, or when the risk of failure is high. Netweavers noted that they prioritized the relational benefits of co-work:

- "Co-work is not about goals as much as it is about inspiring people to innovation, to try things and know that it's okay to fail."
- "One of the trade secrets for effective co-work is trusting each other to do the work. You need to give space for relationships to get built, which is a painful thing to do. Relationship building is so important for all the other changes we want to see, so we give a lot of space for that."

Co-work is best done in small teams. Coordinating multiple teams in co-work must strike a balance between operating with a common set of guidelines and being nimble and flexible enough to give people freedom to apply the guidelines to their unique circumstances. While having everyone do the same thing allows for coherent conversations from a common entry point, there people will resent being asked to do co-work that is too regimented to enable creative adaptation to place and opportunity. The trick is to preserve enough coherence so that the different groups can provide feedback to each other about the different outcomes they've achieved, which can provide unexpected benefits to your organization:

- "We give them a ton of flexibility and we trust them to do what they think is best for themselves."

Initiating co-work can be as simple as a regular conversation and idea-sharing – one netweaver provided this example:

- We run a Muscles & Mindsets program where we pair people to have a structured online one-hour conversation per week. The conversation always includes a fun icebreaker where you've got to share something personal, apply some tools to your situations of interest, and have time to reflect together about what you are experiencing. It really helped strengthen collaborative muscles - because even if you didn't realize it you were exercising core muscles like active listening or sense making."

Co-work can also be technically complex and ambitious. For example, the U.S. Fire Learning Network (Goldstein and Butler 2009, 2010) provided funding and technical assistance to help small teams of fire practitioners in each landscape in the network advance through a 4-step co-working process to set goals and priorities, develop strategies, act, and measure results. First participants developed models of ecological conditions before European settlement. The second assignment involved mapping current conditions and desired future conditions to identify the change needed. Then they developed a plan to reintroduce fire to achieve these desired ecological conditions and protecting human communities. Partners constructed monitoring and adaptive management plans in their final assignment. Through all these steps, managers acquired knowledge and operational skills while learning about the roles and values of ecological and cultural fire restoration. They also developed new collaborative routines that enabled them to gain confidence with new management approaches, like prescribed burning, which require inter-organizational cooperation to safely perform. Once cooperation is initiated, new virtuous cycles are initiated as people work together, gain skills, and recognize and agree to shared risk and responsibility.

The ultimate virtuous cycle: shared governance

Virtuous cycles are about reciprocity, and organizational reciprocity in its most developed form is co-governance, which can unleash the creative potential of your organization. Cultivating your members so that they can take on this responsibility requires leadership that maintains a reciprocal flow between freedom and guidance – you guide your community by understanding what they need and what they can provide, and you trust them to take responsibility for identifying and pursuing their own needs:

- "It's important as network organizers and facilitators to have a strong understanding of the kinds of opportunities you have and be positioned to take action and articulate that in a transparent way. That creates space for lots of things, so you're not dictating it, you are actually taking advantage of those opportunities."

Creating self-sufficiency is a theme netweavers kept coming back to – they were always looking to create opportunities for their members to turn to each other for answers, and to reinforce peer-to-peer connections that become habituated over time:

- "Rather than making ourselves more of the hub at the center of a hub-and-spoke network, we're creating many more channels for other people to find one another, taking ourselves out of the middle. I'm challenging myself and encouraging others to boomerang questions to somebody out in the periphery rather than me."
- "Never do anything alone. It doesn't matter what I'm doing for the network, I'm going to identify and work with another member to co-create or co-lead us. It's never doing anything in a vacuum."
- "Even when I know the answer to a question, I connect them with another member who I know will also have that answer. I don't want to become the bottleneck; I'm creating

bridges in the network to facilitate that connection. Then they can feel more comfortable talking to each other. This creates a space for people to learn from one another and not having to come to me, even though I'm at the center of most of it, since I can see a lot of it. I think that creates more of a sense of agency.”

Supporting the creation of virtuous cycles that become autonomous and self-governing captures the wisdom of a gardener creating a growing and self-willed living system:

> “The best outcome is when people are doing it for themselves and self-organizing. Of course, that doesn't always just happen. Think about a permaculture metaphor of trying to get a garden to the point where it's doing its own thing. It may require different interventions on the part of the gardener so it reaches that level of maturity, and never to overdo it. It is really getting the system humming. Often those of us who sit at a leading position have a more holistic view - not better, just a more holistic view - of what's going on and we can lend our eyes and perspective to the actors so that they can have a better orientation.”

Conclusion

Netweavers set virtuous cycles in motion by encouraging and supporting group members to “pay it forward” without directly expecting something back every time. Their principal advice was to initiate a virtuous cycle by creating a welcoming environment, assess what people wanted to give and receive, be the first to give your members something valuable, call attention to their successes, and underscore the value that you provide them every time you interact – even if it's just a tight agenda and a meeting that ends on time. One powerful way to foster reciprocity that they emphasized was to organize semi-autonomous small-team activities, or co-work. While co-work can and should accomplish useful outcomes, its greatest value may be in how it contributes to building trust and autonomy that supports an organization's capacity for self-governance.

Citations

Corbin, Juliet, and Anselm Strauss. "Basics of Qualitative Research (4th Ed.): Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory." Sage Publications: Newbury Park, CA., 2015.

Goldstein, Bruce. "System Weaving During Times of Disruption." This Issue, 2021.

Hansen, Toran. ". The Virtuous Cycle of Social Support and Trust in Network Facilitation." Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal, no. 13 (2016).

Law, John. After Method: Mess in Social Science Research. London: Routledge, 2004.