

You Need a Community, Not a Network

by Brook Manville | 12:00 PM September 15, 2014

The internet is great for spreading information and rallying crowds, but you can't mobilize people to collaborate and create something of lasting value simply by connecting them via the web. To get serious results from a network, you need commitment and a continuity of relationships among the participants.

To borrow language from the philosopher Avishai Margalit (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avishai_Margalit), the web is a “thin we” (http://www.douglasksmith.com/2005/11/thick_wes.htm) type of network. Participants tend to belong for individualistic reasons. They have little in common with other members, and they're reluctant to do much for the network. A big goal requires a “thick we” network — a community of people who feel responsible for collaborating toward a shared purpose that they see as superseding their individual needs. Members of a community — as opposed to a simple network — expect relationships within the group to continue, and they even hold one another accountable for effort and performance.

When networks develop into communities, the results can be powerful. Look at the accomplishments of Wikipedia contributors, open-source software developers who find and fix bugs in Linux, or doctors who help each another with difficult diagnoses as part of the Sermo (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sermo>) social network.

Now more than ever (<http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/06/ceos-sometimes-need-outside-help/>), businesses are reaching beyond the boundaries of their organizations, tapping experts, customers, and, more broadly, “the crowd” to build new products, services, and other solutions. But as corporate leaders join this trend, they should be mindful of the two types of networks. High performance comes when they are able to turn a thin, no-obligation, ephemeral network into something more — a real community.

Creating a community means getting participants to think and act collectively, to set aside (or find ways to align) their own interests in favor of a common purpose, and to accept a degree of accountability. Leaders of many nonprofits have shown themselves to be adept at this kind of community building. Consider Ashoka (<https://www.ashoka.org/about>), which provides start-up funding and support for social innovators worldwide. Founder Bill Drayton led the way in fostering collaborative entrepreneurship for collective social change.

Building community in the for-profit world, which lacks a grand social mission, might seem daunting. But a number of companies have done it, and others are experimenting every day. In the 1990s, *Fast Company* magazine expanded rapidly (<http://williamctaylor.com/fast-company/>), despite limited capital, because its founders inspired people to build a movement of change in the workplace. Instead of passive subscribers, it created “communities of friends” who generated new story ideas and collaborated with *Fast Company* staff to develop themes of the “new management revolution.”

At Best Buy in the early 2000s, Julie Gilbert (http://www.wolfmeansbusiness.com/history_of_wolf.php) was in charge of an internal network aimed at developing female leaders. Like its rivals, Best Buy tended to sell consumer electronics from a strongly male perspective. Eager to change that, Gilbert encouraged her group to reach out to women customers. Inspiring these consumers to help make electronics retailing more women-friendly, they gave what was at best a loosely connected network of customers some of the trappings of a community. Network members readily participated in focus groups and collaborated with Gilbert's group to develop new programs and store designs. The initiative helped Best Buy increase sales and reduce return rates among female customers.

In 2008, Pfizer was struggling (<http://www.amazon.com/Collective-Genius-Practice-Leading-Innovation/dp/1422130029/>) with an unwieldy and costly model of obtaining outside legal help. As Linda Hill and her colleagues have described, the company needed expert knowledge as it navigated the technically and ethically challenging waters of pharmaceutical development and marketing. But the specialist law firms that it employed rarely cooperated with one another or even shared much information. New general counsel Amy Schulman urged the firms to look past their immediate concerns and work toward cross-boundary collaboration. The goal was to help one another get smarter, while collectively providing superior solutions for Pfizer.

Under the new Pfizer Legal Alliance, the 19 participating firms agreed to switch from billable hours to an annual flat fee. The

new structure encouraged cooperation, a shared governance model that built common understanding, and a new electronic communication platform that facilitated exchange — all of which benefited everyone, including Pfizer. Although each firm's participation still depended on payments from Pfizer, the larger accomplishments of the alliance were possible only as the lawyers worked together for the common goals.

What can leaders do to turn a network into a community? First, those who do this well don't let their lack of formal authority over participants keep them from actively leading. Thin-we networks can self-organize, but a sustained community requires strong guidance and nurturing so that people align with the larger goals. Effective community builders put the larger purpose front and center, stretching people with a higher vision.

Second, they couple the inspirational message with a real-world focus on performance. They keep everyone attuned to measurable results, achieved with collective action. Meanwhile, they're pragmatic enough to engineer ways for people to gain some direct personal benefits along the way. These include gaining new professional skills and conventional networking, as well as the social fulfillment of being part of a group working together.

Finally, and most important, they make participants the real heroes. They push the responsibility for achievement firmly onto the shoulders of others. The more responsible participants feel, the more energy and drive they'll offer — and the better they'll feel about participating. There's nothing so motivating as feeling that you're really needed for something important.

In our emerging super-networked economy, the next-generation leaders will increasingly be mobilizers, not directors. These leaders will define their role not as "me" but "we" — and understand that when it comes to "we," the thicker the better.