

THE FOUR PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

The key to implementing successful social networks involves the adoption of four essential principles. These interrelated principles are the drivers of any social network initiative that strives to create positive, sustainable outcomes for individuals, families and communities.

MEMBERSHIP

The welcoming, accepting nature of social networks is driven by the fact that people who participate feel that they belong, are an essential part of a whole, and have an important role to play. Members feel empowered to:

Belong. Members identify themselves as being a part of something that has special meaning to them. "I belong to..." "I'm a member of..."

Have a voice. Membership often connotes the right and opportunity to have a vote in organizational matters. But social networks go beyond asking people for input. Because members are responsible for creating and enacting solutions, they are expected to exercise an active voice regarding the direction and strategy of the network.

Give back. Members are invited and expected to use their talents and skills in service to the network. Everyone is expected to be a contributor.

Foster collective action. Working toward the achievement of a collective goal, members are encouraged to interact in collaborative ways. They have the power to effect change for a larger community that has expressed an authentic demand for it.

Support constant expansion. As members bring in others from their own personal networks, or connect new members to information, resources and relationships, they enable the healthy growth and expansion of the network.

DEMAND-DRIVEN

Members of a social network are there because they are motivated to make a change. They know what needs to change in their lives - social networks simply provide the framework in which members can shape programs and create opportunities that are relevant and valuable to them. A demand-driven environment will open the door for:

Self-determination and regulation. Rather than be limited by service offerings pre-designed by professionals who may have limited insight into a member's particular circumstances, network members decide for themselves what they need the network to provide. New choices constantly emerge as network members begin to directly shape the offerings. A social network environment must allow the network to organically develop through the self-regulation of its members.

Choice and value. The "one size fits all" mentality does not work in network environments which thrive on the diversity of their members. The *value* of the choices and options delivered are determined by two essential characteristics: variation and relevance. Effectiveness will be measured on whether and how often members select and use the offerings to meet their particular needs.

RECIPROCITY

Members participating in a social network form a mutual interdependence on one another, so that while a member leverages resources and services from the network, he or she also gives back to others. Reciprocity requires that the following characteristics be present in a social network setting:

Leadership. Leaders are responsible for making connections between people, reaching out to members and bringing out the leadership qualities in others. All members have the capacity to be leaders in some form, because everyone has something to offer to the network. Leadership groups or teams are an ideal way to help guide leadership, and leadership training and strategies help new leaders emerge.

Non-hierarchical relationships. Social networks grow by connecting people to each other in reciprocal relationships that are not one-way (e.g., provider to client), not dependent, and not hierarchical. Everyone is considered an equal participant.

Facilitative staff. In social network organizations, the role of staff is one of facilitator, not expert. Staff take care of the administrative details, connect the network and its members, and keep the vision.

Safe connections. Investments in people-to-people connections require a commitment to provide a safe environment where people can meet and engage comfortably, and create opportunities for people from different backgrounds and experiences to build community in ways that reinforce mutuality and reciprocity.

LEARNING

Growth and learning require that opportunities exist to acquire knowledge, understanding or skills by being together, thinking together, and sharing new experiences. A healthy learning environment is one that is:

Transformational. The achievement of successful results often mandates more than a change in current processes or practices. It requires a reframing of our roles and relationships, changing who we are and how we act. This transformation requires embedding the new knowledge and insights we gain into routine practices.

Innovative. In order to effect change from “the way it’s always been done,” members must be willing to introduce and create new and different ideas, methods and tools.

Constantly expanding. Every person in a network represents new knowledge, resources and relationships that he or she can contribute to the network and its members. As the network expands to include new input, members benefit from broader exposure to additional resources.

Adaptive. Social networks that develop organizational structure in response to needs that are determined and driven by members are more open and adaptive. Organizations that are willing to be flexible and modify processes in an organic manner will enable the network to always offer ideas and solutions that reflect the current needs of the community.