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Some useful 'network' terminology to get you started

Although many have not heard of it, Social Network Analysis (SNA) has been a formal field of study for almost 50 years. More recently, it's been also been branded as Organisation Network Analysis (ONA).

You might find some of the basic concepts we've included below an interesting launching pad for further personal study.

Social Network: the strength and nature of connections (relations) between a group of people

Nodes: the basic component parts of a network.

(Relational) Ties: connections between nodes. Ties (or links) can be strong, weak or non-existent. Ties may be thought of as pipelines, carrying many things (e.g. influence, resources, information etc.).

Density: the extent to which the nodes are inter-connected.

Centralisation: the degree to which all members are central to the network.

Degree centrality: where an individual sits in the network, including how they are connected with others.

Closeness: how many links away a node is from another. E.g. You may not know an individual but you do know someone who does.

TO MOVE THE NEEDLE, DON'T BET YOUR SHIRT ON THE ORG CHART!

Moving the needle in the knowledge economy

One of UGM's interests and core areas of expertise is leadership development. We were recently involved in a leadership program where leaders presented development projects that they had been working on during the past year.

In two sessions, in Sydney and Melbourne, these leaders delivered over 40 fantastic projects that collectively impact thousands of people. Since each project was leadership oriented, the exercise of influence was a continuous consideration. Time and again, no matter the context or scope of the presentation, networks of influence emerged as critical to current success and future impact of the projects.

A key insight for all present, was that most often influence (and project success) was achieved without formal authority. Unsurprisingly, in the networked world of today, it is the extent and quality of relationships that moved the project needle most often and most significantly! Although the formal organisational chart cannot be ignored, it is the informal network of relationships that inevitably delivers greatest project traction.

A rapidly evolving networked world

Unless you've had your head in the sand, you'll have noticed a marked rise in the use of social networking technologies this past year. Even if you haven't used them, there are few who haven't heard about Twitter and Tweets, Facebook and LinkedIn, and blogs. They are just the start of a whole new way of connecting, contributing and belonging. And they're as revolutionary as email was, compared with traditional, paper-based letters.

Similar technologies, such as Google's Wave, have entered the social networking arena with much hype and fanfare. Then, unable to attract and sustain a critical mass of users within the network, they fizzle and die. Both the successes and the failures highlight the dynamics of networks.

It's not only about numbers. It's also about the quality of the members in the networks, and the perceived value of network relationships. No one will consistently invest time in a network that looks as if it won't ultimately deliver a worthwhile return. If the network doesn't have the right people or the right connections, then it hasn't got a lot going for it.

Leading in a networked world

Regardless of whether or not we use social networking technologies, it's highly likely that the people with whom we interact are influenced far more by networks of relationships than by the formal organisational chart. Although circumstances may sometimes allow us to harness the authority of an

organisational chart, research shows that we should only use this source of power as a last resort. Influencing, without resorting to formal authority, is likely to be more effective and also more sustainable.

Just as in the days of old, knowledge is power. UGM research shows that expertise (knowledge) is an important component of leadership. People will usually only choose to follow those who have expertise relevant to the current context. This may be specific technical capability, or perhaps team process skills, such as coordination or motivation.

In the past, those with formal authority (let's call them managers) often had greater knowledge than their subordinates. The key difference today, is that many, rather than a few, have knowledge or know where to get it. People are generally much better educated in the first place. Secondly the Internet allows individuals, even with a basic education, access to an incredible store of knowledge. People are using their increased knowledge to make more informed (and more powerful) personal choices.

So, it is highly likely that there'll be more than one person exercising influence in the teams you're part of. In fact, if this is not the case, then the team is probably under-performing. Instead of thinking about teams as bounded containers, we benefit from conceptualising them as a network of inter-connected individuals and relationships.

Internal and external connections

Strong teams are able to make the right internal connections, at the right time. This maximises the use of individual capabilities for the benefit of the team. Individual members are usually most happy when their skills are recognised and they are contributing to their team.

High performing teams also have strong external connections, with individuals and networks able to add value. It was this point that was so powerfully demonstrated at the recent leadership presentations. The projects that were best placed to deliver maximum benefit were those where leaders had developed strong links beyond the project team. External networks variously provided the projects with additional resourcing, increased reach, fresh ideas and even increased capacity to influence.

Examining your networks

How well are you harnessing the power of networks? Since networking is likely only to increase in importance, perhaps you would benefit from a self-audit of your networks? You might start by thinking about the networks of relationships that make up the various teams you're in. Does this insight point to why some are more successful than others? And what about that stalled project? Is it connected for success or, possibly, ineffectively wired for failure?