



## Leveraging Your Social Networks

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Social networks are multidimensional self-organizing webs of relationships – each with its own purpose – that tie an organization together. We form and sustain social networks out of common interest or purpose...something that matters to everyone in the network. Virtually anything that matters to you exerts pull which in turn attracts a social network.

Some networks may overlap. You may connect with the same person around a variety of common interests. Your neighbors (a network formed because of physical proximity) may be your golf friends (a network formed through mutual interest in the sport). Networks can overlap.... The person you go to with a work-related question may also be a social friend.

Some networks are unique to a specific outcome and may be extremely short-lived. If you call a help line connected with a specific piece of software, your network consists of one person whom you have most likely never talked with before and may never talk to again.

Networks can also become interdependent and can be mutually reinforcing. We know this intuitively when we find common interests in sports or music and so forth. When the same people are in multiple networks with each other because they have multiple sources of significance or importance, the effectiveness of one network affects the others. Social deficit in one network can degrade another that is overlapping. Social capital always builds stronger social networks.

At their best, social networks give birth to the best thinking and cultural attributes of the individuals that comprise the network into a quality of both wisdom and culture that results in a whole that far exceeds the sum of the parts. They are the seedbed of innovation...the creation of new forms. At their worst, they are

*“Let’s just keep asking ourselves this question: ‘is what I’m about to do strengthening the web of connections, or is it weakening it?’”*

*~ Margaret Wheatley*

purveyors of groupthink, polarization and cascades. At their best, they connect people to lofty values. At their worst, they reinforce all of the biases and baser instincts of their members. At their best, they trigger great riches of individual and collective thought, attitudes, beliefs and even mood. At their worst, they degrade the very talent, intelligence, expertise and quality of relationships that they are designed to leverage. At their best they represent the attributes of connectivity that foster emergence. At their worst they undermine the natural self-organization that moves people toward a common goal.

It is through social networks that joint beliefs, attitudes and expectations are developed and reinforced. Social networks exert a powerful influence on both the culture and the quality of outcomes in a work setting. They influence habits, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, moods, and the level of engagement. They also affect the quality of our collective thought. They impact and reinforce personal habits such as smoking and eating and health.<sup>1</sup> They also can either support or undermine the spread of all the attributes of natural leadership. Whether it is making the right things matter most, trusting emergence, creating high quality connections that are not limited by silos, hierarchical level, or any form of group identity that hinders the emergence of information. You are strongly influenced by the effectiveness of your social networks. And this in turn either supports or degrades the quality of every organizational outcome ...from out of the box thinking to customer satisfaction...from breakthrough innovation to flawless attention to detail.

Social networks are a two-way street. You develop a profession and take a job because of something you care about. You may or may not check out the pervading culture...the way people treat each other...the morale...the prevailing mood...the values...what matters most to people. Yet each of these attributes represents a sub-network of reinforcement.

We have all experienced the way in which one or two people with toxic attitudes can degrade an entire work environment. Their very presence fosters attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that drag at the ability of others to exercise natural leadership. When a co-worker or manager becomes the target of such beliefs and attitudes it can not only affect that person's morale but can also erode their effectiveness. Little mistakes happen that then reinforce the negative beliefs of others. The signals that accompany these

attitudes actually degrade the intellectual acuity and general competence of others in the network.

For this reason, the practice of social networking is not just about getting the right information. It is also about creating sustainable change in the way that information is used...the culture... where the work happens. The very act of working beside or even managing people who live the attributes of natural leadership influences you toward those very same attributes. Both understanding and leveraging the dynamics of social networks are core elements in the spread of leadership from the inside out.

So, the core challenge that is addressed in this paper is: How do you leverage social networks to foster emergent change that moves outward in all directions?

There are four dynamics that foster the development of an optimal social network to create change from the inside out: choosing what you pull, starting close in, moving it out and trusting emergence.

## **Choose What You Pull**

### **Make the right things matter most.**

Social networks are so reliable in their formation that at any point in time they act as an individual and collective mirror of what matters to you. Remember that an expanded network always reliably reflects the attributes that are being pulled. You pull social networks based on your beliefs, intents and purposes. When you see a social network that does not seem to coincide with what you think you have pulled, it's time to step back, look in the mirror (reflected back by our social networks) and choose the beliefs, intents and purposes that would draw the kind of social network that you desire. What you see is what you individually and collectively thought that you wanted. On the individual level that may mean that you are all connecting because you are on the natural leadership journey to fulfill your own essential selves and that of others. On an organizational level you may be seeking to ever fulfill the essential mission of the organization more effectively such as, for example, superb outcomes and experience. That means that if you are actively practicing and feeling fulfilled by the attributes of natural leadership you will begin to pull people who want the same thing. Conversely if your habit is to demean others, compete for power or any of the other

behaviors that degrade others you will find yourself connecting to those who share that orientation.

This quality of inclusiveness has multiple implications when applied to the social networks in a work setting. It means that what matters most to the organization is aligned with what matters most to the individuals in that organization. When safety mattered most to Alcoa the Unions joined management in fostering it because safety signaled, “we care about our employees.” What mattered most transcended group identity. It did not undermine the relationships among union members, for example. It enhanced their relationship as they focused on the bigger picture and the significance that they shared. This is why the big picture is so important...Identifying the big, inclusive picture determines how people see information across groups....making the right things not only matter, but matter most.

It also means that anyone from anywhere in the organization can be drawn to being a part of that network. Silos, organizational levels, professional position or in fact any work related responsibility may matter...but not matter most.

The more comprehensively your thoughts, emotional investment, beliefs, and feelings are aligned by the things that matter to you and to others the stronger and more tight-in the social network becomes and, not surprisingly, the more powerfully it reinforces and influences the very beliefs and attitudes that caused you to form it in the first place. The pattern of people that you pull gives you a mirror into who you are and what you care about.

### **What happens when the wrong things matter most?**

The wrong things can be surprisingly subtle. For example, when what matters most is group identity or is based on a system of thought or beliefs rather than the qualities of the culture such as the attributes of natural leadership, then the entire social network reinforces the rejection of non-conforming beliefs. We can easily see how that plays out on the political and international scene. It has led to great mayhem to say the least. But the same dynamic affects social networks as they operate in the workplace.

For example, researchers have found that if members have a high degree of solidarity, then polarization between their group and others will be heightened. Furthermore, if individual members perceived one another as friendly, likable, and similar to themselves the size and likelihood of the shift will increase. So,

for example, in a hospital system, if physicians or physician assistants or nurses or managers identify strongly with their group and have good social relationships and that matters more than fostering the attributes of natural leadership, the result will be polarity among the sub-groups.<sup>ii</sup> It creates boundaries and undermines cooperation across groups.

What sets a natural leader apart is that there is high commitment to what matters most. Thoughts, emotional investment, mood, beliefs, and feelings that are not aligned with the attributes of natural leadership don't attract natural leaders. It is from the context of these attributes that a natural leader connects by modeling natural leadership... even with people who are toxic. A natural leader can be a part of a work-related social network that contains people who operate with beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that are toxic and still exert natural leadership. The attributes of natural leadership are hard wired in all of us even when they are not self-evident in our behavior. People, who might get on the toxic bandwagon, may respond positively to this influence, and begin to shift their own attitudes.

### Start Close In

We have explored the way in which the people with whom we create close social networks affect so much of the way you think and feel and act. The close relationships that you are forming as a part of your desire to refine and continuously improve your ability to embody the attributes of natural leadership, were developed not because you are longtime friends, or identify with a professional group or any of the multiple interests and sources of significance that pull people into social networks. You are together because you want to become ever more effective natural leaders.

Maintaining and deepening this network is especially important when you are first honing your own natural leadership attributes. It provides high reinforcement and support. Some guidelines for creating a high impact close-in social network follow.

**Create Frequency of Contact:** High frequency of contact increases the intensity of social networks and therefore strengthens their impact on members. So how do you create high frequency in a work setting that is demanding or in which you are not in continuous proximity? That may not be as difficult as it

seems. The following techniques all increase contact...some in surprising ways.

**In My Thoughts:** This is a simple process of thinking about and picturing each of the others that are part of your close-in network including both thoughts of encouragement to each other and thoughts about the qualities that you see in others that you wish to emulate in yourself.

Surprisingly, this is an extraordinarily powerful way to stay in contact. When someone is in your thoughts you can be mindful of the very elements of natural leadership that you are practicing. When you picture them as natural leaders you are reinforcing the same attributes in yourself. Your neurons fire the same way when we are imagining something as they do when we see it visually. Therefore athletes practice the fine details of the execution of their sport through visualization. Having people in your thoughts enhances your connection, increases rapport, appreciation, and emotional alignment. There is an if...and this is a big if...if you are not only seeking your own value fulfillment but also caring about the value fulfillment of others who are in your thoughts.

*In my thoughts* can be practiced from anywhere. And it does not take much time during a busy day. It is a valid form of contact and enhances the power and influence of a social network. Practice this form of connectivity and notice what begins to happen to the rapport and sense of connection between yourself and those who are in your thoughts.

**Brief Moments:** An exchange of knowing supportive looks can send an abundance of information that enhances the emotional quality of connection in a social network. In addition, these thin slices enable you to mutually reinforce and support the best instincts of others in the network. Information that is sent and received so quickly that the exchange operates below the awareness of either the sender or the recipient is referred to as a thin slice because it is both instantaneously and seamlessly picked up and interpreted. We exchange obvious signals through language and non-verbal cues that are easy to read. But we also exchange them in countless subtle ways, many of which are not conscious.

We make amazingly accurate judgements about attractiveness, likeability, trustworthiness, competence, and aggressiveness during the first 1/10 of a second according to Janine Willis and

Alexander Todorov.<sup>iii</sup> Virtually any belief, opinion or attitude held by a person who is in your presence, can create a trigger whether we are aware of it or not.

We are so good at reading this information, without even thinking about it, that our instant interpretation can be more accurate than a trained observation. We seem to pick up and understand the meaning of thin-sliced information best when we do not over-think it. Any athlete who has been in a slump knows what happens when you over-think your game. Researchers, for example, have discovered that people who are trained to look for signs of lying do not score as well in accuracy tests as amateurs. The experts were so invested in their analytical ability to detect liars that they learned to ignore their own intuitive interpretation of thin-sliced information instead of leveraging it.<sup>iv</sup>

These thin slices are not easily masked. You respond to these thin slices of information even when you cannot put your finger on why. Notice how when you walk away from conversations with some people you feel lighthearted and with others you feel a sense of disquiet even when you would find it difficult to describe what triggered the reaction.

Researchers have discovered that the muscle that orbits the eye (the orbicularis oculi) that combines with a smile to signal happiness cannot be activated by will<sup>1</sup>. We can fake a smile, but we can't display fake happiness with our eyes. We often sense when people are incongruent even though if we are asked, we might have a hard time explaining why. So, if you want to trigger the best instincts in other people you can only do that from the context of those same instincts within yourself.<sup>v</sup>

Even the tone of voice can convey an enormous amount of information about the nature of the relationship. One study discovered that it is possible to predict the probability of malpractice claims of physicians simply by listening to the tone of their voice for 20 seconds. This was the case even after the audio data had been pared down to eliminate verbal content.<sup>vi</sup> This thin sliced information, as was discussed before, sends powerful messages that build or undermine relationships not only with customers but also with others in your social network. They make the network more powerful or weaken it.

Based on multiple studies it is known that when your best instincts are triggered even through thin slices, you see a larger field of information and that this increases mental acuity. Best instincts or natural inclinations not only strengthen the connection within a social network. They also make people more effective.

### **Texts and Other Short Connections Supported by**

**Technology:** It takes little time to write a text, but texts can support the connection between people in a social network. They are a simple way to stay connected...and they put the other person in your thoughts.

**Conversations of Mutual Support:** Both between one or two members of a subgroup within the close-in network or in huddle, conversations of mutual support provide the added resource of specific feedback and problem solving directly with others. This is a powerful way to leverage the social network to reinforce the attributes of natural leadership.

**Connect with Enjoyment:** This includes the ways we connect with each other such as sharing stories, recalling experiences, having fun, and sharing activities. When you find enjoyment with other people the relationship deepens and reinforces the power of the close-in network.

### **Move It Out**

Researchers have discovered an interesting phenomenon when studying the way in which social networks affect our ability to hone new habits. When a network is created for the purpose of supporting the new habit, already existing networks can undermine the change. Any of those other networks whether they are formed based on friendship, functional area, formal leadership hierarchy or even your professional group, can mirror attributes that conflict with those of natural leadership and consequently degrade your own natural leadership journey.

Expanding your networks is key to creating change from the inside out because the collective beliefs, attitudes and habits of the old culture persist even as the people who populate it change. There is, however, a driver of success in a new natural leadership network of which we are often unaware. The attributes of natural leadership...and the desire to embody them is a natural propensity. You would never believe it by the way people behave sometimes, but the desire to fulfill your essential self and that of others, comes with the package. The new network enables people



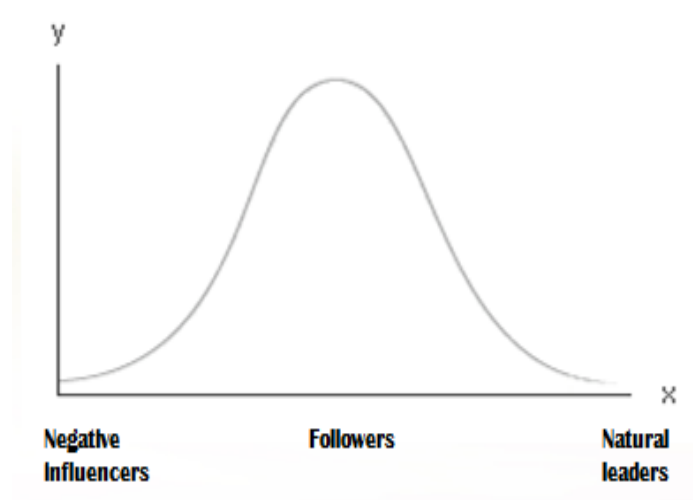
to access something that is already there to be accessed. Here are some suggestions for moving your social network out.

### Where do you start?

Connect with those who most demonstrate the attributes of natural leadership. You can think of your organization as consisting of natural leaders, followers and negative influencers. Followers are powerfully influenced by the moods, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of those they work with most closely whether they are natural leaders or negative influencers. The word follower in this context, therefore, has nothing to do with whether people are in positions of formal leadership. No matter where they land in the organizational hierarchy, followers mirror the dominant culture of which they are a part. The good news is that any follower can learn to become a natural leader.

As the bell-shaped curve in figure 1 below illustrates that most people in a typical organization are somewhere in the middle. <sup>vii</sup>

Figure 1



Begin by connecting with the followers who are closest to the natural leadership end of the continuum. They, in turn will do the same with those in their own social networks.

**Practice Brief Moments with Others.** Expand the band width of your relationship with the followers that you are connecting with. Trigger their natural leadership attributes and see what happens.

**Be the Mirror.** Pay attention to what you pay attention to. Pay attention to the attributes that you are reinforcing in your close-in group. What you pay attention to creates the mirror neurons which drive the habits and behaviors that affect you. Be the mirror with *all* the people in your social networks even those whom you might think of as negative influencers. There is no better way to practice the attributes of natural leadership. Being the mirror is the simple practice of focusing on your own value fulfillment and caring about that of others no matter whom you are with.

**Notice those that Respond** to your mirroring and *deepen your connection* with them using the techniques described earlier. Broaden the social network band width by triggering their best instincts, appreciating them, and enjoying their presence.

**Share Your Journey.** You now can be a source of encouragement...a coach to those who most embody the attributes of natural leadership. In addition, the process of being a coach can reinforce living the attributes yourself.

**Connect Them to Others in Your Primary Natural Leadership Social Network** and by so doing, expand it.<sup>viii</sup> You can then support them as they engage in a similar process in their respective social network. For those that respond, practice the guidelines that create powerful relationship in your close-in group. Connect these people to others in your close-in network and invite them to use the guidelines themselves.

### **Follow the Pathway of Emergence**

Every social network is predisposed to operate in emergence. This means that they will evolve and find new opportunities to grow and expand. Like attracts like and more is created. Social networks have an emergence propensity; until and unless, you create obstructions. You will naturally expand your natural leadership network both at work and with your other social networks such as family and friends. In every instance simply practicing the attributes of natural leadership, will influence the network and in turn support you in your own journey.

Networks that operate in emergence occur because of individual volition. People want to be a part of the network because it matters to them. These networks emerge from mutual recognition based on each member's beliefs, intents, and purposes. Social networks that operate in emergence, therefore, are collaboratively/cooperatively pulled.

Anything that inhibits, blocks, restricts, or otherwise affects the fluidity of social networks creates waste. But the more your social network aligns with multiple sources of pull, the more cohesive the network and the more likely that the network will operate in emergence. They will continuously self-organize.

At any point in time, the social network represents the optimal relationships that are attracted by the people in the network. This optimal network is easy to fail to recognize. For example, a person might come to mind that works in a different department or level or type of job. Why did they come to mind? You think: "She has a lot of the attributes of natural leadership," but do you write off the possibility of connecting about it or do you trust emergence and find a way to connect. Every connection is an opportunity to expand the natural leadership network.

Following are some suggestions about ways to allow emergence to continuously expand and deepen your natural leadership network.

**Allow it to continuously reveal itself.** Let go of preconceptions of what it would look like. Imagine that once you let go of preconceptions, that you will recognize it and that it will perfectly match your attributes. Imagine saying "*Voilà!*" If you are too inside your own expectations, then imagine that you are someone else looking at your network. Then let it go. It will come to you as awareness. Be prepared to be surprised at the seemingly serendipitous way in which social networks continuously emerge.

Continuously move forward with the social network that you can see. Sometimes, pulling the social network is somewhat akin to driving at night in which your headlights illuminate only a few hundred yards ahead.

**Ignore boundaries.** Boundaries are barriers to connection that you create in your own mind. The qualities of natural leadership are emergent. If not in some way constrained, they flow in any direction with any combination of people because they are not pulled by any of the distinctions that separate people from one another. The generative force behind the emergent qualities of leading from the inside out is the common desire to embody the attributes of natural leadership. Think of the boundaries that exist in the typical organization: levels of leadership, definitions of roles and responsibility, silos, professional specialties etc.

Allow the usual boundaries to become invisible. Imagine the way in which the emergence of natural leadership would flow were it not

debilitated by any of these boundaries. Let it happen and allow yourself to recognize it as it emerges. Then build your social network...from the inside out.

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<sup>i</sup> Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler, Connected, How Your Friends' Friends' Friends Affect Everything You Feel, Think, and Do, Little Brown and Company, New York, New York, 2011, pp 1`16ff

<sup>ii</sup> See Karen Jehn, Gregory Northcraft and Margaret Neale, Why Differences Make a Difference: A Field Study of Diversity, Conflict and Performance in Workgroups, 44 Admin.Sci.Q. 741(1999).

<sup>iii</sup> Janine Willis and Alexander Todorov First Impresions: Making Up Your Mind After a 100-Ms Exposure to a Face., Psychological Science; July 2006.

<sup>v</sup> The New Unconscious, edited by Ran Hassin, James Uleman & John Barg. Oxford University Press, New York, 2005 (Chapter 12, page 309, *The Glympted World: Unintended Communication and Unintended Perception* by Y. Susan Choi, Heather M. Gray and Nalini Ambady).

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid

<sup>vii</sup> For a full exploration of the way in which natural leaders influence organizational performance see the White paper: Inside Out The Untapped Influence of Natural Leaders, by Lewis Frees Ph.D.

<sup>viii</sup> A white entitled: Emergent Structures and Processes will soon be available. It is a fuller description of the techniques that can be used to support virtual high quality social networks in order to foster natural leadership