

Networking

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‘In recent years there has been a growing interest among community workers and other professionals in the practice of networking and the development and use of networks. Like ‘community’, the concept of ‘networking’ is in danger of losing its meaning and becoming a catch-all phrase for any kind of communication or loose association of people.’ (Gilchrist and Rauf, 2006, p.1)

What is Networking?

‘Networking is the process by which relationships and contacts between people and communities are nurtured and utilised to share skills, knowledge and experience for mutual benefit.’ (Gilchrist) This can happen informally through personal connections or more formally through a networking structure. Informal links between people and organisations can grow into something more open that ensures access to all members. This process is often facilitated by community workers and can help community organisations and representatives become involved in formal partnerships with decision makers.

Why is it so important?

Networking represents a way of working that enables people to make and sustain links within and between organisations & communities.

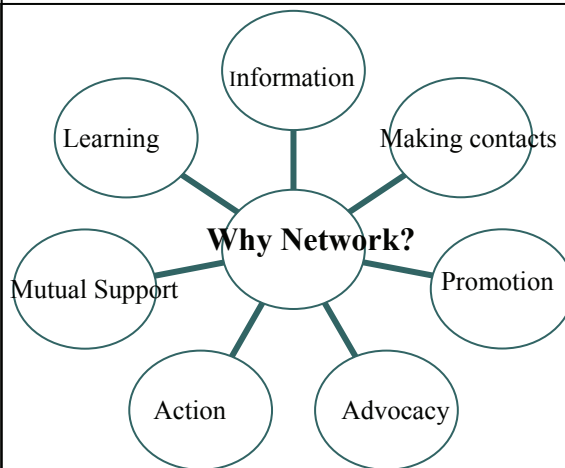
This work of maintaining relationships is often hidden but is vital to:

- ⇒ strengthen community infrastructure
- ⇒ build social cohesion
- ⇒ ensure successful partnership working
- ⇒ develop collective action and empowerment
- ⇒ challenge institutional discrimination and injustice.

Networking & Community Development

Networking is fundamental to the process of community development. Community development is a way of working which encourages and enables people to tackle for themselves the issues which they have identified as being important. Networking must therefore focus on creating opportunities for all and challenge discrimination and equality.

The case for networking



Information: keep members informed about current developments in their field and share information among themselves.

Making contacts: members can meet others to share ideas, think of new ways of tackling issues, work together and share resources.

Promotion: raising awareness of activities and work. Members know who is doing what, this can prevent unnecessary duplication and give them a contact to approach for support.

Advocacy: promoting a particular approach to work and articulating a collective view on issues.

Action: creating opportunities for members to do things together while protecting their own identity. Providing members with a forum for debate and discussion.

Mutual support: keeping up confidence and enthusiasm. Members feel empowered

Learning: formally or informally

Recommend read ‘Community Development and Networking’ By Alison Gilchrist with Tanwir Rauf, 2006. Produced by and available from Community Development Foundation www.cdf.org.uk or Tel: 020 7833 5448. £7.95

inscape

Briefing



Networking and Inequalities

‘Networking has the potential to redress inequalities as it creates the possibility for skill, knowledge and expertise to flow across organisational and cultural boundaries. This can give disadvantaged individuals and smaller groups access to support and information that they may not be able to access on their own. Feelings of oppression and hostility can be lessened through shared support and discrimination can be tackled by joint campaigning, education, debate and negotiation.’ (Gilchrist and Rauf, 2006, p.4)

Network development...

Any potential network developers would need to:

- o gather information about their circumstances and resources
- o analyse their situation
- o prioritise actions they wish to pursue
- o join together to form a group or organisation
- o work-out the means to implement these actions.

Considerations for networking or for an emerging network...

- Who will you contact?
- How many members are there or could there be?
- Who is eligible to join?
- Where will you meet?
- Who should benefit from activities?
- What will the network do? (mission & aims)
- Will power be held equally by all members?
- How will members participate?
- How will you communicate?
- How often will you communicate?
- How will costs be met?

Remember networking can take place at a variety of levels and it can be very beneficial to clearly identify the specific groups/agencies or departments that you wish to network with and be clear about why. So it is important to take part in events which give you the opportunity to meet people you may not normally meet or who may be marginalised by mainstream organisations. It is also important to maintain good relationships across the community.

Community workers are often involved in assisting networking by introducing people to each other and suggesting the possible usefulness of the connection.

Networks as communication systems

Communication is crucial and networks provide excellent channels for finding out who's who and where they can be reached.

Methods of communication may include: face-to-face meetings; signposting; e-mail groups; news letters; online discussion forums; networking events or themed conferences and use of the media. Creating informal opportunities for networking is an important way of helping people to get to know one another.

‘Hear the silences’ - It is also important to recognise which voices are not communicating and which issues are not being raised.

It is important to ensure that all information is easily accessible and jargon free and that members are sufficiently prepared to contribute.

Remember the importance of communication!

Sometimes people working towards the same goal can be working against each other without ever realising it. Sharing information and support can ensure you don't have your hook caught in someone else's net.



The challenges of networking

- ◆ Enabling groups to participate without losing their valuable independence and voice.
- ◆ Ensuring networks don't promote personal interests or exclude any people or sections of the community.
- ◆ Ensuring groups have the resources (time, money and skills) to take part.
- ◆ Enabling groups to participate at regional and national level without diverting their energy from the work at local level.

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